

THE PRESTIGE CHRISTOPHER PRIEST ON THE BOOK & FILM

BRITAIN'S LONGEST RUNNING SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

ISSUE 207

INTERZONE

Original Stories

echoes of a distant war...loving the alien...
the allure of ancient settlements...

David Mace

Suzanne Palmer

Dave Hoing

Wendy Waring

Daniel Kaysen

On Discworld and
filming Hogfather

TERRY PRATCHETT

Neil Gaiman

Ian Stewart

Jack Cohen

Mutant Popcorn
film reviews

Ansible Link
news & gossip

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Stunning art

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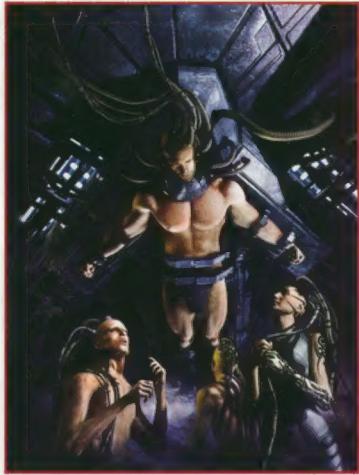
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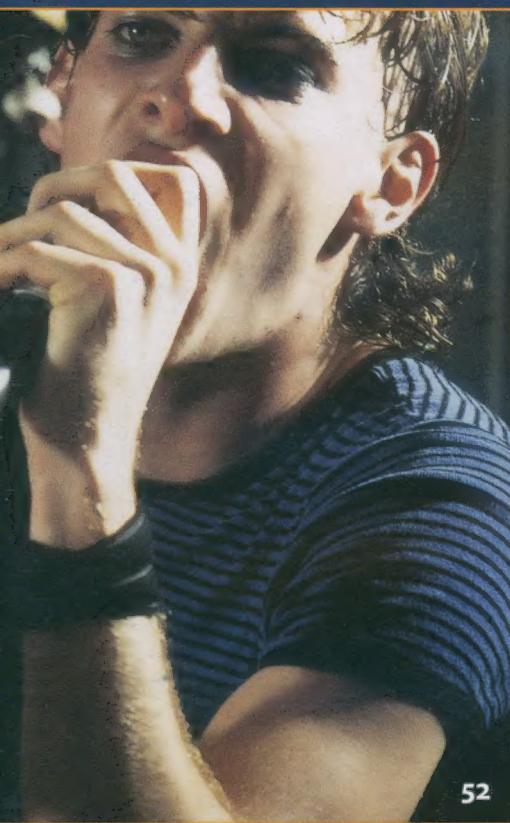
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IT'S BIGGER ON THE INSIDE

As you can see, we've made a couple of changes. *Interzone* is now a bit smaller, stitched, and printed on matt paper inside instead of gloss, the intention being to improve handling and the ease of the read. It was difficult choosing between gloss and matt stock, so in the end we just had to try it and see what your reaction was. Do you like the look and feel of the matt paper, and the fact that it doesn't reflect the light, or do you prefer gloss?

Please don't assume that the slightly smaller size means less content. If anything there's more stuff in here than usual, a trend which is set to continue, and if there are just five stories this issue it's only because a couple of them are so long, over 25,000 words between them.

You'll also find a new middle section, an extra four pages, which replaces the somewhat annoying yellow insert. This will contain your subscription reminder and order form as usual, but we'll also use this section for publisher news and offers, and things like the Readers' Poll, which we invite you to participate in this issue. Thanks to Martin McGrath for taking this job on again.

Also in this issue you'll see that we've delivered on our promise to provide an interview with Terry Pratchett that, unlike our last effort, actually does justice to everyone concerned. Andy Hedgecock took on the responsibility, and then took it further, adding to the mix conversations with Terry Pratchett collaborators Neil Gaiman, Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen. And if all this interviewing and reviewing wasn't enough, Andy has now joined the editorial team proper.

Thanks also to Richard Marchand who has supplied three superb pieces of artwork at lightning speed. And belated thanks to artist David Gentry who dug us out of a hole last issue. Wish we could thank all contributors individually, but we can't, obviously. Suffice to say we are very lucky.

One thing we *haven't* done this issue is review all the novels we wanted to. We do try hard to get British books as far in advance of publication as possible. But at least we can make up for the absence of coverage of *Nova Swing*, for example, by announcing that we have a new story from M. John Harrison soon. Meanwhile, we hope that you enjoy this issue!

**LANGFORD POSES WITH ALIEN ARTEFACT, NORTH WALES**

Hugo Awards from L.A.con, the 2006 World SF Convention... Novel: Robert Charles Wilson, *Spin*. Novella: Connie Willis, 'Inside Job' (*Asimov's*). Novelette: Peter S. Beagle, 'Two Hearts' (FeSF). Short: David D. Levine, 'Tk'tk'tk' (*Asimov's*). Related Book: Kate Wilhelm, *Storyteller*. Dramatic, Long: *Serenity*. Dramatic, Short: *Doctor Who*: 'The Empty Child' and 'The Doctor Dances'. Editor: David G. Hartwell. Artist: Donato Giancola. Semiprozine: *Locus*. Fanzine: Britain's own *Plokta*. Fan Writer: David Langford (blush). Fan Artist: Frank Wu.

Harlan Ellison caused his customary stir at L.A.con by publicly groping GoH Connie Willis's breast during the Hugos. She seemed unruffled – the show must go on – but at the closing ceremony said something very like: 'If someone wants to start a petition for Harlan Ellison to keep

his fucking hands off of me, I'd be willing to sign it!' Ellison has since launched another lawsuit, against Gary Groth and Kim Thompson of Fantagraphics for (a) using his trademarked name with the unwise subtitle 'Famous comics dilettante' on the cover of an anthology reprinting an old HE interview; and (b) alleged defamation in their book *Comics as Art (We Told You So)*. The statement of complaint impartially describes Fantagraphics as 'a tiny but hostile publishing outfit', Groth as 'a scheming pathological liar...an obsessively vindictive and petty man', and Ellison as famous, fearless, magnanimous, scrupulous, etc.

J.G. Ballard's latest is unsuitable for us sheltered fans: 'Kingdom Come goes far beyond the stockades of conventional science fiction,' explained Ian Thomson in *The Scotsman*.

EDITORIAL**ANSIBLE LINK DAVID LANGFORD**

Jon Courtenay Grimwood's *Guardian* sf column got the chop after five successful years. He writes: 'While remaining "absolutely committed to genre," the *Guardian* feels it needs time to bring freshness to its current coverage. Expect such "freshness" to be unleashed on the *Guardian* reading public sometime next year!'

AS OTHERS SEE US

John Joseph Adams ruefully reports: 'I called CBS to request an advance screener copy of their new TV show, *Jericho*, a post-apocalyptic family drama sort of thing. When I explained I'd be reviewing the show for an sf magazine... Publicist: "Oh, but the show's not science fiction." Me: "Isn't it post-apocalyptic?" Publicist: "Yes, but it's based on events that could actually happen."

William Shatner, offered a free Virgin Galactic space trip in 2008 (normal cost £114,000), decided that discretion was the better part of boldly going: 'to vomit in space is not my idea of a good time.' Sigourney Weaver is made of sterner stuff, and plans to be aboard.

Bad Guys. The all-time top ten literary villains, voted on by 16,000 UK children: **1** Lord Voldemort (Rowling), **2** Sauron (Tolkien), **3** Mrs Coulter (Pullman), **4** Lex Luthor (DC), **5** The Joker (DC), **6** Count Olaf (Snicket), **7** The Other Mother (*Coraline*/Gaiman), **8** The White Witch (Lewis), **9** Dracula (Stoker), **10** Artemis Fowl (Colfer). This poll was conducted by those utterly disinterested publishers, Bloomsbury.

Thoughtcrime! A Jim Grimsley story purchased by *Asimov's* editor Sheila Williams – contract signed, proofs printed – was vetoed by the magazine's owner because it dealt with, though naturally did not advocate, child abuse.

Vikram Chandra, author of the mainstream *Sacred Games*, declares his literary roots: 'I had always been a big fan of Isaac Asimov, and was writing sci-fi stories by 11.' (*Financial Times*)

AS OTHERS SEE US II

Simon Hoggart on the UK Lib Dem party conference: 'One thing that hasn't changed is the sense that, with the Lib Dems, we are dealing with a rather lonely boy in

his bedroom. Some such have model railways, some invent new planets and go on to become bestselling science fiction writers. Others, like the Lib Dems, create masterplans for the management of an entire society and nation.' (*Guardian*)

Greg Egan was 'gobsmacked by the level of scientific illiteracy' in *New Scientist's* uncritical report on the Roger Shawyer space drive proposal, which magically defies conservation of momentum. Full polemic and discussion at tinyurl.com/n3c7a.

MORE AWARDS

British Fantasy, best novel: Neil Gaiman, *Anansi Boys*. **Cordwainer Smith** **Rediscovery**: William Hope Hodgson of *House on the Borderland* fame. **Mythopoeic** (fantasy), adult and children's: Neil Gaiman, *Anansi Boys*; Jonathan Stroud, *The Bartimaeus Trilogy*. **Prometheus** (libertarian): Ken MacLeod, *Learning the World*; Alan Moore & David Lloyd, *V for Vendetta* ('classic'); *Serenity*. **Sidewise** (alt-history): Ian R. MacLeod, *The Summer Isles*; Lois Tilton, 'Pericles the Tyrant' (*Asimov's*).

Robert Anton Wilson, co-author of the *Illuminatus!* trilogy and guru of offbeat thinking, has only months to live and is broke; he faced eviction from his apartment until a fund-raising call to fans brought help with the rent.

THOG'S MASTERCLASS

Classic Spung! Dept. 'His fingers enveloped the fullness of her breasts quite as a boy grasps soap-bubbles and marvels at their intact resistance.' (Maxwell Bodenheim, *Replenishing Jessica*, 1925) **Squint Dept.** 'His eyes popped open, and for a moment they stared at each other almost nose to nose.' (Robert Jordan, *The Fires of Heaven*, 1993)

Unorthodox Chess Dept. "...Listen, rook to bishop nine. Check it out. Think I've got you, you bastard." [...] Chris studied the board for a moment, moved the piece and felt a tiny fragment of something detach from his heart and drop into his guts.' (Richard Morgan, *Market Forces*, 2004)

Serious Mainstream Dept, or My Vegetable Love Should Grow... 'He felt his cashew become a banana, and then a rippled yam, bursting with weight.' (John Updike, *Brazil*, 1994)

R.I.P.

John M. Ford (1957–2006), highly talented and versatile US sf author, poet and wit, died unexpectedly in September aged just 49. Among his honours were the Philip K. Dick, Origins, Rhysling and (twice) World Fantasy Awards.

Charles L. Grant (1942–2006), prolific US author and anthologist best known for horror and dark fantasy, died on 15 September. He was 62. His many awards included the Nebula (twice) and World Fantasy Award.

Philip E. High (1914–2006), UK sf author who wrote for *Nebula* and the Carnell-era *New Worlds*, and published 14 sf novels in the 60s and 70s, died on 9 August at age 92.

Bob Leman (1922–2006), long-time US fan and writer of fine short stories eventually collected as *Feesters in the Lake* (2002), died on 6 August.

Stargate SG-1's reward for reaching 200 episodes was the Sci-Fi Channel decree that the series (launched 1997) will be cancelled.

Wilson 'Bob' Tucker (1914–2006), much-honoured US sf author, coiner of the term 'space opera', and unquestioned dean of sf fandom, died on 6 October aged 91. The end of an era.

When *The Prestige* came out in 1995 it initially seemed surprising, following books such as *The Glamour* and *The Quiet Woman*, in that it returned to the period when SF was just forming as a genre, which you explored in *The Space Machine* back in 1976. You also wrote about the Edwardian period in *Palely Loitering* (1978). Does the late Victorian, Edwardian era have an intrinsic interest for you, or was it simply the necessary period in which to set those particular stories?

Those three stories are all from different times in my career, approached for different reasons. *The Space Machine* is of course related to H.G. Wells, so it had to be in an exact period (the cusp of the 19th and 20th centuries). In *Palely Loitering* I was trying to evoke the summery feeling of the Edwardian period as it might occur in some future time. (Retro fashions come and go all the time... but I think it was John Brunner who pointed out that the stovepipe hats in the story were a bit much. I've come to agree with him.)

As for *The Prestige*, I wanted to write about 'pure' stage magic, in an age when it was popular, exciting, able to take advantage of scientific and engineering developments, but not in the present day. TV, videos, the internet, etc, are transforming the way magic is performed. So, it had to be the Victorian era. Incidentally, I don't see *The Prestige* as a period piece. I was consciously trying to write the story as if it was happening in the present day. So I tended to play down the horses and carriages, the more formal language, the frock coats, the architecture, the Dore' engravings. Borden and Angier were just living their lives. They didn't know it was a 'period'.

If Borden and Angier didn't know it was a 'period', did the publishers know what sort of book *The Prestige* was?

The Prestige is a good example of the kind of thing that happens. While I was working on the book I simply wrote it. I sent it in, the publishers (the Touchstone imprint, at Simon & Schuster) accepted it. They started the process of editing, typesetting, choosing a cover, and so on. The question of which category it might fit into never arose. Then one day not long before publication I had a phone call from one of the designers. She said she had been speaking to a bookseller, and he had asked her if *The Prestige* was science fiction. She asked me: "Well, is

it?" So I said, "I don't know. What do you think?" We sort of scratched our heads and came to the conclusion that it probably wasn't, but because of the stuff with Tesla towards the end, you could possibly argue that it was. This was the only conversation I ever had with the publishers about that subject. It went through production quickly, with no snags that I remember.

How do you feel about the novel today?
The Prestige was my ninth novel, and I finished writing it about twelve years ago. I'd had a hard time while writing it, but it came good in the end. By the time I delivered it to the publisher I was more 'high' than I had ever been over one of my books. How do I feel about it now? The general rule is that after I've finished a book, I tend to feel cool towards it. *The Prestige* is the exception. I've grown away from it as the years go by, but I still love the book. I don't love everything in it (see my several past references to the cold warnings handed out by Graham Greene), but overall it still works the way I intended it to. I think *The Separation* is probably the one novel of mine I feel strongest about, but *The Prestige* is a favourite child.

You're probably way ahead of me here, but are you aware of the film just coming out in America called *The Illusionist*? It looks like *The Prestige* has a twin...

Yes, I'm aware of it...and have been for some time. *The Illusionist* was made a couple of years ago, and has been on the shelf, seeking a distributor ever since. It seems pretty obvious to me that when they heard *The Prestige* was coming, the producers, or the distributors, felt they could cash in on it.

I like Steven Millhauser's work, but the story of his on which this film is based is not his best. Like a lot of recent fiction about stage illusions, it describes an illusion so wonderful that no one can explain it. Then it turns out to be supernaturally derived. The problem with the supernatural is that once you accept it as a real event, anything can happen, anything does then happen...and after that nothing matters. For me the essence of *The Prestige* is that the illusions described in the book are real illusions, built on traditional stage-magic principles. The book contains all the information the reader needs to work out how things are done - there isn't a trace of the supernatural anywhere. Anyway, in

the novel it's not the illusions that matter: the book is about obsessive secrecy and insatiable curiosity. At the time of writing this I haven't seen Christopher Nolan's film, but I think, expect and fervently hope that he has taken a non-supernatural line too.

This intrigues me because the central illusion in *The Prestige* – In A Flash – is not accomplished by either traditional stage craft or by 'real' science, but by pseudo-science so fantastical it might as well be supernatural. Yet there is clearly a difference here for you. Am I missing something, and can you explain how you differentiate Tesla's device from fantasy?
 This touches on the essential difference between science fiction and fantasy. SF is in the end about human responsibility: actions lead to consequences, and the fiction describes, discusses and evaluates those consequences. Those actions can be couched in reality, or they can be speculative in nature. Thus it is a moral fiction, and the highest forms of it can be accepted as literature. Fantasy is the opposite: it is about the intrusion of irrational and uncontrollable events, over which man has no control, or only nominal control. Once fantasy attempts to grapple with reality it ceases to be fantasy, so the generalization holds.

In *The Prestige*, a speculative novel, it seemed to me entirely legitimate that one could invoke Tesla's experiments (which were fantastic and lurid in his lifetime, and many of which were patented but never demonstrated in public). What you say is true, but it is a given in the novel that Tesla is a scientist, not (for example) a witch or a mage.

Incidentally, an early draft of the novel was read by a friend, with a scientific background. He rejected the Tesla equipment in the novel as completely impossible. "This would never work," he said. "It would take the output of 5,000 nuclear power stations working at full capacity for a thousand years." I thought about that for a bit, and then decided, on balance, that it sounded as if it could after all be made to work.

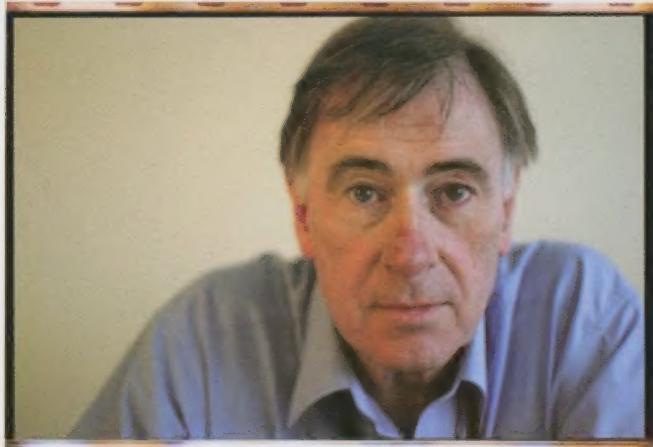
***The Prestige*, and almost all your work is concerned in some way with your characters struggling to understand the nature of the world they find themselves in, and either discovering they are not the person they thought themselves to be, or**

THE PRESTIGE CHRISTOPHER PRIEST INTERVIEWED



QUESTIONS BY GARY DALKIN





photograph © Patrick Imbert

the reality of the world is something other than they suspected, or both. Can you give some insight into why these themes have such an enduring interest for you?

It might sound like a flip answer, but what other theme is there for a writer of fantastic or explorative literature? The traditional novel is usually written by writers who seek approval by confirming the reader's assumed view of the world. In other words, they presume that what they perceive as ordinary reality is something that is shared by everyone else. The imagination is deployed at a consensus level. So you get the story where everything turns out comprehensibly all right in the end (ie things are as we like them to be, or which everyone promised they would be), or else where everything goes comprehensibly wrong in the end (ie you'd better watch out because you're going to find out that everything your parents, teachers, etc, warned you about is really true). This is comfort literature, where risks are applied only to characters (not to the readers), where surprises are sprung only on the characters (not on the readers), where you can put the book down for a day or two, and find you can pick up the story without any problems.

I have always believed that readers are made of sterner stuff. I dislike obscurity in fiction. I always try to write in plain language, so that the meaning (or at least, one of the meanings) is clear. Beyond that, the reader is on his/her own.

I see my early novel, *The Affirmation*, as a kind of template for this sort of thing. The idea of that novel was to question assumptions, not confirm them. Everything in the book is straightforwardly told and factually described, but almost nothing in it can be trusted as being 'true'. Mind you, the reader doesn't know this for a while, but the clues are there from the start, almost from the first line.

At different times, perhaps starting around the period of *The Affirmation*, you have distanced yourself from the SF world. What sort of writer do you consider yourself today?

I try not to think about this when I'm writing. I just write Christopher Priest novels – I'm the only one who can do that. I know it sounds like I'm trying to evade the issue, but it is in fact the only true and exact answer to your question.

Does being thought of as a science fiction writer bring advantages, or problems, given the wide misconceptions about the field in the wider world?

No, being called a science fiction writer does not bring advantages, or if it does the advantages are small ones. In my experience it brings more problems than anything. I just feel that SF and I have both changed over the years. When I started writing, the kind of work I wanted to do was identified with the 'upper middle' of the SF category. I admired J.G. Ballard, Philip K. Dick, John Sladek, Brian Aldiss, Ursula Le Guin. But as the years have gone by, the genre of SF has been progressively and persistently dumbed down, with the result that work like mine is seen as marginal. I'm sometimes accused of writing 'challenging' books, or people seem to suspect that I want to be a literary writer. Although from time to time I've said, "I'm fed up with science fiction!", this is a little like the occasional outbursts of "I'm fed up with seedless grapes!" or "I'm fed up with the Green Party!", or other temporary outbursts accompanied by the sound of a door slamming. Emotionally I still feel I'm part of the SF world: it's my background, many of my friends are involved with SF, I go to SF conventions, and so on. I feel sentimental about all that, and anyway the SF world is like family to me.

Back to the screen, is there any realistic likelihood of any of your other books or stories being adapted for film, television or any other medium that you know of at the moment?

Likelihood is not up to me. I assume *The Prestige*, if it works well as a film, might interest other producers in the rest of the books. Over the years there has been consistent interest in my stuff, but until *The Prestige* none of the options led anywhere. At the moment, *Fugue* is being developed in Australia. There has been continual interest in developing *The Glamour* ever since it came out, but surely it presents insuperable problems to all but the most innovative film-makers? *A Dream of Wessex* has had several scripts adapted from it, at least one of which was hysterically lousy. There's a guy in Los Angeles who wants to film *Inverted World* (but who goes silent whenever I pop the age-old question about the dosh). And so on. All writers with more than a couple of books in print receive these enquiries and options, most of which go nowhere.

In an ideal world which of your books or stories would you most like to see adapted for the screen, and which filmmaker(s) would you most like to see do the job?

The one thing of mine I'd love to see filmed is *Thank You, Girls*. Not many people know it. *The Dream Archipelago* is a film waiting to be made, in my view...but then I'm prejudiced. After that, I'm not fussy. Who to do the job? As of this day in early September, before I have seen *The Prestige*, Chris Nolan seems to me an ideal director, as we clearly have so many ideas and approaches in common. However, he has this odd interest in bloody Batman that I can never understand, other than in terms of his career positioning. I'll reserve judgement on Nolan until I see *The Prestige*. I'd like to see one of the younger Spanish or South

American directors have a go. There's a lot of tremendous stuff coming from those parts of the world. Korean directors scare the shit out of me, but some of the most thrilling movies of all are Korean now. Kim Ki-duk's *3 Iron* is one of the best slipstream movies in years.

Finally, how do you feel about what you know of the film of *The Prestige* so far, and what has your experience with the filmmakers been?

I've been content throughout to let Nolan get on with it. I've written two long novels since Newmarket bought the option, and I'm currently on another. Filmmaking is his racket, not mine. Neither Nolan nor his production team has shown any interest in what I think: they took the book, adapted it and filmed it. I take the pragmatic view that if you're spending \$40 million on making a film, you have a right to be a bit proprietorial. (I have to swallow a bit, though, when I keep seeing references to something called "Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige*.)

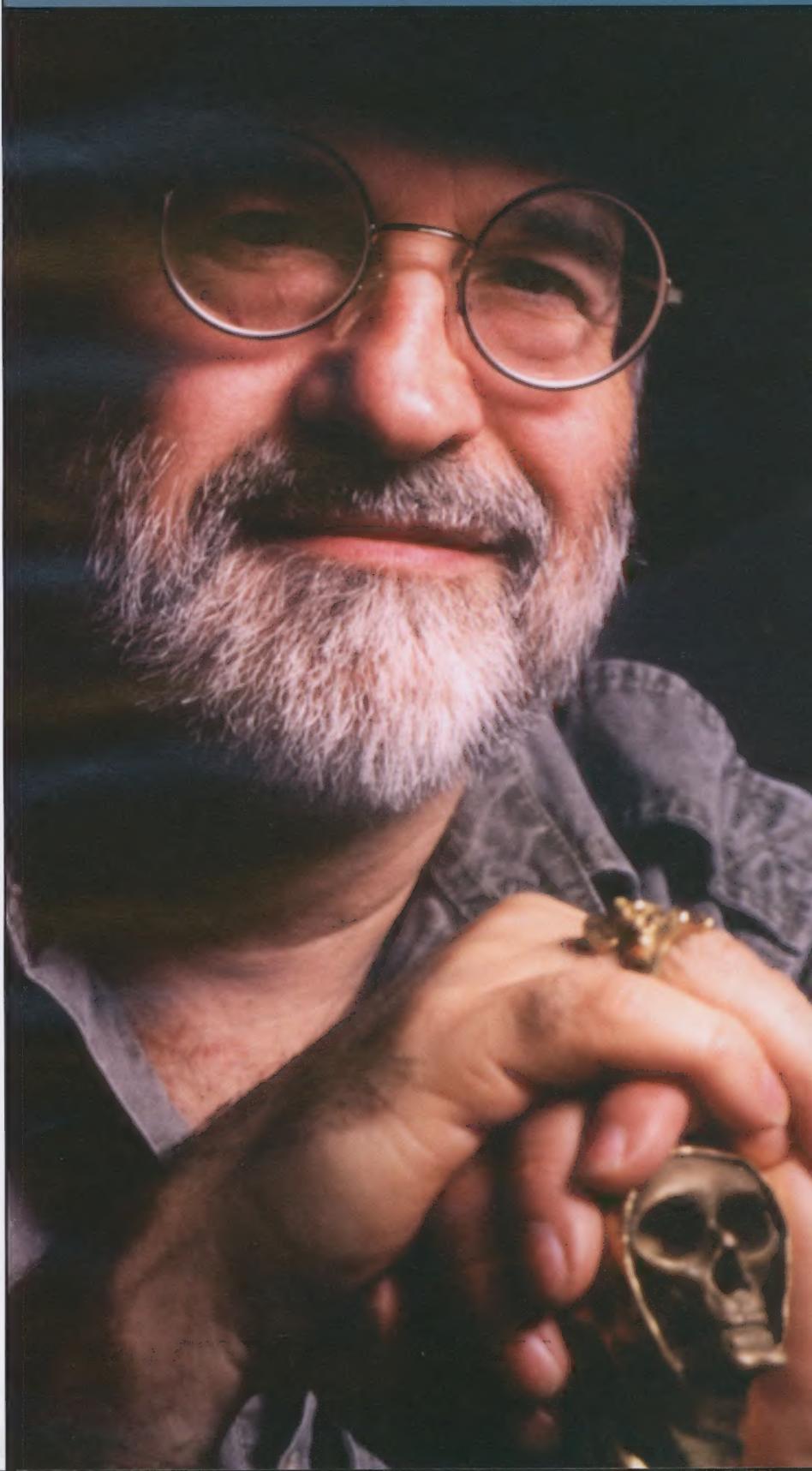
I was sent a copy of the screenplay a couple of years ago, but not on a consulting basis. Apart from that, I know in fact very little about the finished film. But from the screenplay (since revised, incidentally) it's obvious that Nolan and I think alike about stage magic. I was never very interested in magical secrets, or how tricks are done – neither is he. I'm much more interested in the almost insane levels of secrecy that magicians get up to, and the concomitant curiosity that that sort of thing arouses. So it seems is he. The script (originally credited to Nolan's brother Jonathan, but now apparently a collaboration between the two of them) deftly and with great ingenuity converts several of my complicated metaphors into vivid visual images – wait till you see what David Bowie does to Pike's Peak. The plot works out differently from the book: the ending is different in detail, but Nolan has come up with a new ending that carries the same kind of wallop, but in a cinematic rather than a literary way. While I was reading, I was delighted to be taken by surprise several times (and I'm supposed to know what happens). All I can say is that if Nolan has worked at the same level of intelligent creativity he showed in *Memento*, and if he has drawn on the cinematic skills he used in his *Batman* film, then we are in for a terrific movie. However, many a slip...

We wait and see. I am agog to see it – I am about as agog as it's possible to be.

The Prestige opens in the USA on October 20, and in the UK on November 10.

DANCING AROUND THE OAK

TERRY PRATCHETT INTERVIEWED





ALL INTERVIEWS BY ANDREW HEDGEBOCK

My first exposure to the work of Terry Pratchett came when I was listening to BBC Radio's *Woman's Hour* while driving through the Cambridgeshire fens. The first Discworld book, *The Colour of Magic*, had been serialised for the programme's story and drama slot. Unfortunately, the presenter's introduction set up expectations of the type of maladroit parody of the Sword and Sorcery genre that relies on ludicrous character names and archly crass, mock-heroic dialogue. My heart sank and I nearly switched to Radio 1. But I gave it a chance and gradually immersed myself in Pratchett's world: the landscape of Discworld; the misadventures of insurance clerk cum tourist Twoflower and the cynical and inept wizard Rincewind; and the antics of a set of sapient and fiercely aggressive luggage.

In the twenty-odd years since then, Pratchett has published nearly sixty books – more than forty of them based in Discworld or illuminating Discworld and its cosmology – and transcended the status of bestselling author. In the late 1990s it was reported that he was the author of more than one percent of all books sold in the UK.

Once an author reaches an audience of that size it becomes all but impossible to analyse the factors underpinning his appeal. For me, the attraction of his work over the years has rested on his bravura blending of broad farce and subtle irony, and the sheer creativity of his approach to contriving collisions of the epic and the comic. He's never been one for relying on the lazy expedient of taking the piss out of the conventions and tropes of the fantasy form, opting instead for drama and

comedy derived from an undisguised relish for the idiosyncrasies, folly and charm of human beings.

Pratchett's writing does, however, have its playful and satirical aspects. So when I was asked to interview him for *Interzone*, I began by asking if he set out to subvert particular fictional icons and mythological archetypes.

"Um... I don't think like that. I don't go around saying, 'Hey, I'm subverting the genre, me!' Mostly, I'm accepting it on its own terms and taking the classic consensus fantasy universe logically. Oh, I've enjoyed bringing back evil elves and inventing Igor clans and reintroducing golems, but I don't think I'm changing the nature of the genre. I'm probably dancing around the oak, not chopping it down."

But if Pratchett casts himself in the role of celebrant rather than iconoclast, what underpins his attraction to the fantasy form? Why is he dancing around the oak?

"For the joy of it. The fun you can have with ideas, and making nonsense logical. The pleasure of splitting open a joke and finding an interesting truth inside."

"When I was at primary school we pretty much all had paint boxes, the basic tin kind with maybe a dozen colours, and I envied the posh kids who had the big boxes with turquoise and silver and gold. Well, that's a metaphor for fantasy, that is. The genre gives you all the colours the other genres have, and you get silver and gold as well."

But, to stretch Pratchett's metaphor to breaking point, his own 'big box' includes a few iridescent colours – most notably his humour, which modulates from light to dark throughout his narratives. Prior to starting my dialogue with Pratchett I'd

been reading *On Comedy*, a book of quirky and fascinating autobiographical essays by comics legend Leo Baxendale, creator of Minnie the Minx, the Bash Street Kids and Grimly Fiendish. His take on comedy is as follows: "Comedy by its nature provokes an active response, because it is intimately linked to the quickness of perception of the reader. Proper comedy cannot be for a passive audience."

And Baxendale goes on to challenge some of the lazier comedic tropes: "But in the comic world I was bringing into being, the concept of a 'deserved' poke in the eye, or 'deserved' disaster had no meaning."

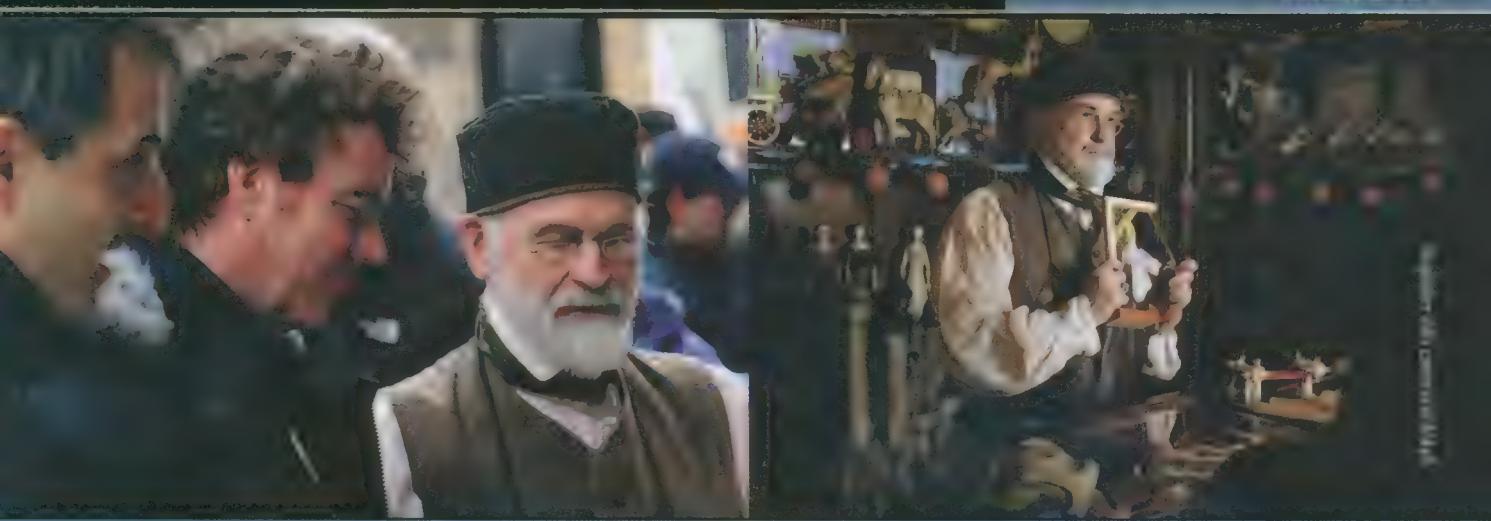
I suggest to Pratchett that his comedy challenges the reader's expectations in a similar way, but he's not entirely convinced.

"Not really. Baxendale's comment is about comics, not comedy. Comedy's rather more than just tragedy happening to other people."

But, I ask, to what extent does he see comedy as a way of tackling life's tragedies and iniquities?

"Wholly, I'd say. I'd agree with Baxendale that funny is not the same as nice. God knows there are some hilarious tragic situations. Look at the start of *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*: everyone's been blown up! Bofo! And I was proud of that scene in *Small Gods* where, in a huge, terrible torture chamber, there are the torturer's mugs, brought in from home of course, which say things like *To the World's Best Dad*. It's a bit more than comic."

"Discworld is an evolving world, its people are treated as real. A lot of its humour is based on the resulting incongruities. It just arises naturally. Like swamp gas."



COMEDY, FILE CARDS, LEGRANGE POINTS...

THE CASE AGAINST FILE CARDS

This fascination with incongruity is at the heart of Terry Pratchett's stories: it sets up much of their humour and, for many readers, provokes consideration of the nature of humanity and the human imagination. I ask to what extent his narratives are developed with the intention of stimulating this kind of speculation.

"I'm not certain I do it consciously! But what obsessed me since I was a kid was how unusual and transient normality is: on the one hand we have the unthinkable powerful raging fires of the universe, and on the other we have tea towels. So reading Chesterton when I was about twelve was an eye opener for me – wow, here was someone else saw the spears in a line of railings! My Granny introduced me to him via an ancient copy of *The Flying Inn*, but I soon found *The Man Who Was Thursday* and *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* and, thanks to a local second-hand book shop, lots of his essays.

"I loved the idea that the way to see the amazingness in the everyday was to see it from an unexpected direction. A lot of Discworld since, oh, *Reaper Man* has touched on the idea that it's our narrative imagination that makes us human; we know a lot about ourselves, but we can *imagine* that we're not monkeys. We've got quite good at it.

"But in the books a lot of this arises from the story, rather than a plan. You know the kind of writer who plans every single scene on file cards before starting? Well, I'm the opposite sort."

So does this rejection of formal planning processes mean his narratives have developed in a way that has taken him totally by surprise?

"I've come to the conclusion that, in some strange way, I know what I'm doing, that some part of my brain is holding all those little file cards where I can't see them and feeds them to me at odd times, so that I realise why the teeth were important, or why there had to be a dog in that scene. None, therefore, has ever really surprised me, because I watch them evolve by degrees. I often start with no clear idea of how this book will end, but with absolute confidence that the starting conditions contain the promise of a good one, and I just have to navigate."

It isn't too surprising that Pratchett acknowledges G.K. Chesterton as an inspiration: he's a writer who invested tragedy with comedy, fused the fabulous with the quotidian and, according to David Langford, "Regarded reality with enduring amazement". But, I wonder, what other books and authors inspired or enthralled him?

"Hmm. Paul Jennings, who used to be a columnist for *The Observer*. Quite surreal in a strange, funny, down-to-earth way. Sadly forgotten by all but a few of us, but Hugh Laurie edited a collection some years back. And Jennings's genius is probably one of the few things that Stephen Fry and I would agree on. Jennings was the man who wrote a couple of articles giving new meaning to British place names: 'Tring: the sound of a telephone in the city; Truro: the sound of a telephone in the country'. Some claimed this to be the inspiration of Douglas Adams's *Meaning of Liff*.

"It occurs to me that Jennings was a living, breathing exponent of the Chesterton theory of fantasy. Just trying to translate the German instructions for using a public call box would send him into a weird congruent universe!"

GETTING TO GRIPS WITH LEGRANGE POINTS

Pratchett is acutely aware that the way he's perceived by his audience is a riddled with incongruities as his fiction.

"I think I've drifted into a curious LeGrange point – a pleasant one, so this isn't a complaint! I reckon 90% of my readers are not classic fantasy fans, I got the Carnegie Medal but I don't think of myself as a children's author. And, in some ways, wherever I am, I feel I'm visiting from somewhere else!"

My ignorance knows no bounds. My reaction to this comment is to google 'LaGrange points' before following up on this point. To my consternation, I end up on a site containing the phrase 'those with a mathematical flair' in the first paragraph and feel an overwhelming sense of intellectual exclusion. It turns out that LeGrange points are positions in interplanetary space in which a small object can be theoretically stationary as the result of the gravitational pull of two larger masses. I decide that I get it after all: Pratchett (the 'smaller object' in this metaphor) has reached a state of equilibrium created by the gravitational pulls of various fictional forms and genres. I get a migraine.

This may provide a partial explanation of the way Pratchett's writing has developed, but it doesn't account for the mass appeal of stories that flout the tried and tested marketing categories. Genre blending hasn't brought writers like Russell Hoban, Alasdair Gray or Trevor Hoyle the massive audiences they deserve. I suggest Pratchett's relentless wit and humour are the keys to his success as a writer of 'crossover' fiction.



MISS PIGGY, AESCHYLUS, HOGFATHER THE MOVIE...

"Maybe it just fades the mark of Cain a little: *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* was funny *therefore* it wasn't really sf, and thus it was okay to enjoy. I know I have a lot of readers who swear they don't like fantasy."

I suggest this supports the assertion made by James Cawthorn and Michael Moorcock in *Fantasy: The 100 Best Books*, that fantasy might be less of a genre ghetto if it wasn't associated with "stupefying humourlessness."

"Is it? But I read Leiber and Vance and James Branch Cabell and all those guys who wrote for *Unknown* in the late 40s. There was no shortage of humour there. I'm not even sure there's a real 'fantasy ghetto' any more. Fantasy does sell. Okay, some kids might not want us to play in their street, but who cares?"

"My suspicion is that it's an instinctive thing and that people who just don't like fantasy cast around for acceptable reasons to give for that."

"It just seems to me that I drift along, unattached to any genre now. I call myself a fantasy writer because that keeps me honest, but I've even got out of the habit of going to cons. Possible because they all seemed to be the same con, at least in the UK."

"I remember going to one years ago, because my tour took me to the city in which it was held and I had some time free. It was fine. I met lots of people I knew, and we ended up sitting around having a drink, which never normally happens at cons, as you know. And someone – not me, honest – said that the previous week I'd had the Number 1 bestselling hardback and paperback together, and 'well done'. At which point someone piped up with 'Yes, but you've never been Guest of Honour at

an Eastercon!' Instantly, part of me thought 'It's true! I've failed!' And then the rest of me caught up with 'Hang on, not necessarily...'"

MISS PIGGY AND THE DEATH OF AESCHYLUS

One of the most striking aspects of Pratchett's books is that they are crammed with strong and heroic female characters. This is, I would suggest, still rare in the case of a bestselling male fantasy writer. There's Polly in *Monstrous Regiment*, Tiffany in *Hatful of Sky*, Susan in *Soul Music*, Kirsty in *Johnny and the Bomb* and there are the eminently memorable *Wyrd Sisters*.

"Hmm. Well, let's get rid of Susan. She's Death's granddaughter. Female, yes, but her occult genetics move her into the superhero class. I've met a lot of Kirstys, quite a lot of them at signings – they are at an age where their male counterparts are dragging their knuckles and saying 'dur', so they're understandably tetchy. Polly and Tiffany are sensible girls, brought up in environments where they have to take responsibility. I think they're practical rather than heroic. Confronted with a problem, they assume it's their problem."

But to what extent is Pratchett challenging reader's expectations of the genre?

"I don't know what their expectations are, now. Strong though the women may be, Discworld is true to the conventions of fantasy – and also to the conventions of history in most cases – in that they are in traditional female roles. Dressing up as a man to go to war is very traditional. I just try to make them real."

"Of course, Kirsty, while the most conventionally bright of Johnny's 'gang', is still the token girl – even though she thinks

of herself as being surrounded by four token boys."

Pratchett tells me the characters tend to assert themselves into the narrative. Why?

"Various reasons, I think. I write comedy. Men make better clowns. In the presence of unassertive men, women tend to dominate. And there aren't many strong men on Discworld, at least in the classic sense."

"In fact I find it hard to write weak, compliant women – at least as major characters. Scratch any of them and there is Miss Piggy underneath!"

One Discworld story, published in the early 1990s, has acquired a new relevance. With its satirical take on religious intolerance and fundamentalism, *Small Gods* was – as Sir Alf Ramsey used to say of Martin Peters – ten years ahead of its time. So what led Pratchett to focus on the interaction of irrational thinking and authoritarianism ten years before it became the hot issue? "It seemed like a good idea at the time – in fact, I'd been planning it for years. I'd always been fascinated by the death of Aeschylus, for starters. But I don't think I was breaking new ground. Religious intolerance and fundamentalism were alive and well even then. The fans hated it. Actually, it's probably more truthful to say that the fans who didn't like it made a lot of noise. Since then I must have had more mail about it than any other book. The funny thing is that everyone saw in it what they wanted to see, no matter what their religious position."

HOGFATHER THE MOVIE: LOTS OF NICE SURPRISES

The big news for fans and admirers of Terry Pratchett is that the long overdue first

live-action film adaptation of a Discworld novel is to be screened on Sky One this Christmas. *Hogfather* is a four hour TV film based on the novel of the same name.

Produced by The Mob, and directed by Vadim Jean, it stars David Jason, Marc Warren, Joss Ackland, David Warner, Nigel Planer and a comparative newcomer to film and TV, Michelle Dockery. The part of the Toymaker is played by another newcomer – Terry Pratchett. It also features the voices of Ian Richardson, as Death, and Neil Pearson, as the Raven. So there's a stellar cast working with a Director with a fine track record. But, I ask Pratchett, why has it taken so long for Discworld to be treated to a high profile, live action dramatisation?

"One big reason: I could see a line all the way to filming, and a role for me in it. The Mob weren't mucking about. Things would happen fast; I got a chance to tweak the script; and the director and the producer... well, they had clearly Got It. They even went down to the Discworld mini-con Bernard Pearson holds twice a year in Wincanton to talk to fans, which impressed me. I've been consulted on casting and on the look and feel of some of the sets. In short, I'm being allowed to play with the train set."

"The majority of movie approaches are nothing like as hopeful. It's easy to sell movie rights to *someone*. But is it *someone* who'll get them made? That's the trick. I've watched some of the filming, in Scotland, and I think we're going to have something pretty good."

The Director, Vadim Jean, was responsible for two eminently watchable British films – *Leon the Pig Farmer* and *Clockwork Mice*. I ask Pratchett what it was like to work with him on both sides of the camera.

"I have to say that my relationship with Vadim and the Mob crew has been so much fun that I am beginning to get suspicious. Since the part of the Toymaker was my first time in front of the cameras, it was just as well that I had to play an old man frightened out of his wits to be confronted by Death. I turned down the chance of being the Hair Loss Gnome!"

"Because the movie is low budget, everyone involved has been using a lot of ingenuity to make up for the missing money and, by and large, it has worked. At the recent Discworld Convention a special trailer for the movie and one excerpt got a standing ovation from 700 fans. And fans can be the sternest of critics."

"I had an open invitation to visit the sets whenever I liked, and there are even bits in the movie that were a result of me making

suggestions to Vadim. I had so much fun that it was hard to remember that they were making it for millions of viewers rather than just as a favour for me."

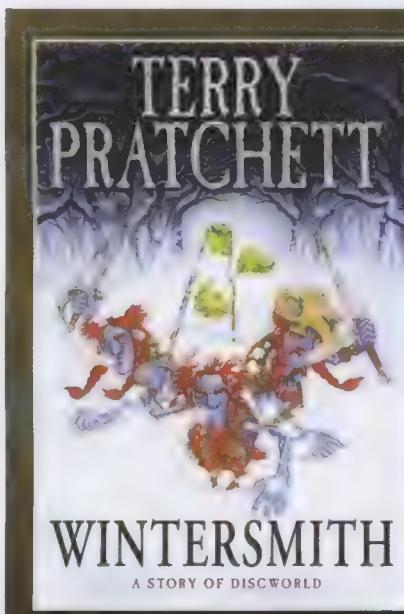
The cast of *Hogfather* is an interesting mixture of household names and relative newcomers. Does Pratchett feel there are any performances that bring an unexpected dimension to his story?

"I think the casting for this movie has been inspired and the obvious candidate for best newcomer is Michelle Dockery who impressed the hell out of everyone. It would be nice to see her career take off as a result of this. But there were lots of nice surprises throughout. I wouldn't have thought about Joss Ackland as Ridcully for example, but the moment I saw a picture of him in a pointy hat, it was hard to imagine anyone else in that role. And I think the

fans fell in love with Nicholas Tennant as Nobby Nobbs. He wasn't born nobby but clearly embraced an inner nobbiness!"

The collaboration with actors and crew has clearly been a source of genuine pleasure. I ask Pratchett how he feels about other interpretations of his work – the BBC Radio adaptations of *Wyrd Sisters*, *Mort*, *Small Gods* and *Guards! Guards!* and the BBC TV adaptation of *Johnny and the Bomb*.

"The radio adaptations have been okay, but sometimes they've forgotten that the books aren't meant to be funny all the way through, and misplayed things. But they handled *Johnny and the Bomb* wonderfully. Disembowelled the narrative and restructured the plot, but it still had the heart and soul of the book. I cheered at the end." ➤

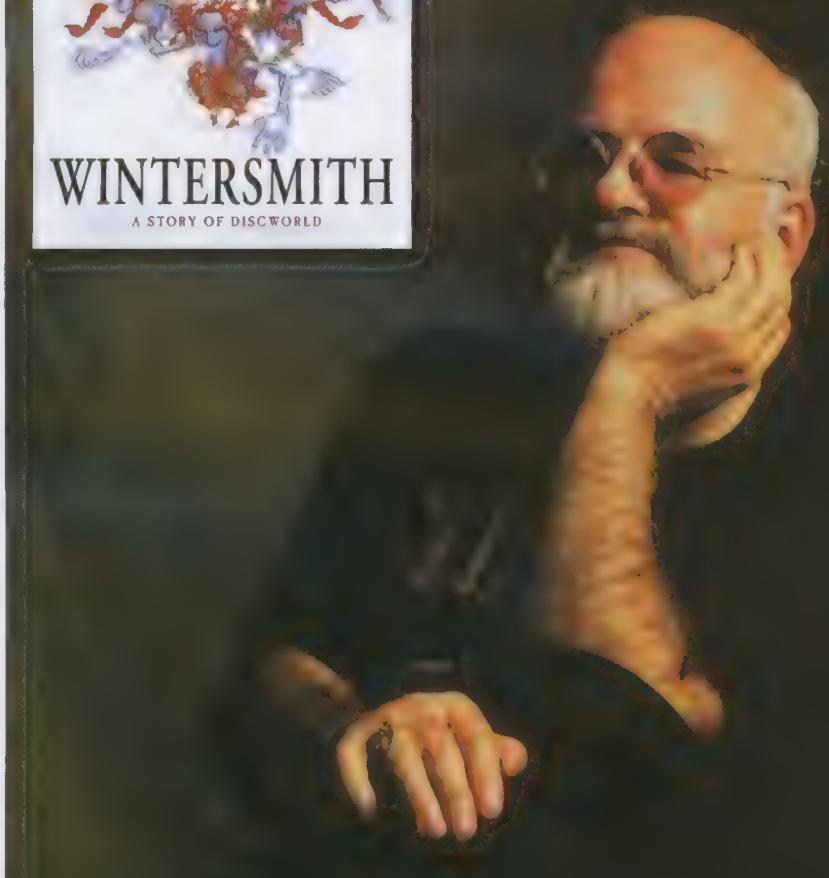


Wintersmith • Doubleday, 400pp, £14.99 hb

Ankh-Morpork Post Office Handbook (Discworld Diary 2007) • Gollancz, £12.99 hb

Hogfather Discworld Calendar 2007 • Orion, £12.99

Hogfather: The Illustrated Screenplay • Gollancz, £20.00 hb



Pratchett's positive attitude to working with Vadim Jean and The Mob leads us to a discussion of his collaborative writing projects: the novel *Good Omens* with Neil Gaiman; and the *Science of Discworld* books with the mathematician Ian Stewart and biologist Jack Cohen, who have been invested by Pratchett as Honorary Wizards of the Unseen University.

"If there's a good reason to collaborate on a story and I think it

might be fun, then I'll do it. But it's not something I'd seek. Neil doesn't rule out another book with me and he was good to write with...yep, it could happen. With anyone else? I don't know, but probably not."

I ask what impact, if any, working with Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen has had on Pratchett's fiction.

"I've known both Ian and Jack for a long time, so it's more that case that knowing them has had an impact! Good scientists are good company

– and they both like sf."

So what excites him about the demands of writing about science?

"Well, in the *Science of Discworld* series they wrote most of the hard science. I just had fun. But it just so happens that the nature of Discworld, as opposed to, say, Narnia, is that it allows for the occasional satire on science – or, more often, on pseudoscience. Let's face it, the outer reaches and maths and physics look just like fantasy to the innocent eye..."

COLLABORATIONS... NEIL GAIMAN, IAN STEWART &



photo © Sophia Quach

A THIRD THING: NEIL GAIMAN ON WORKING WITH TERRY PRATCHETT

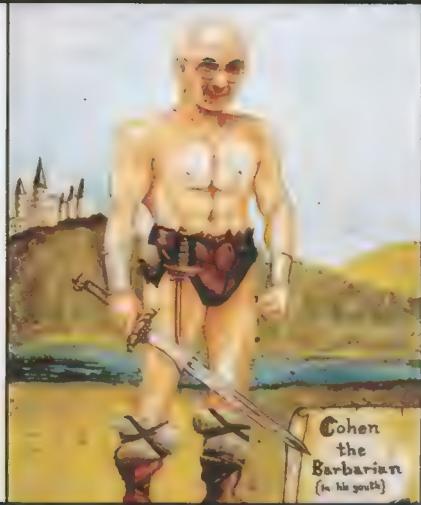
In *Good Omens: the Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch* Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman seem to achieve the kind of literary fusion described in Brion Gysin and William Burroughs's book *The Third Mind* (1978). I ask Gaiman if he'd always been confident his literary partnership with Pratchett would produce something greater than sum of its parts.

"It never occurred to me that it would be *less* than the sum of its parts. I suppose it was the organic way the thing began – I'd written a 5,000-word thing that began in the graveyard and went to the end of the baby swap. It had a Crowley who was much vaguer and less cool and it was written in a style I think of as Classic British Humour – a dash of Wodehouse, a jigger of Alan Coren, a healthy measure of Milne writing for adults and a splash of Richmal Crompton writing for kids, and I'd written it shortly after finishing *Don't Panic! The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy Companion*, so there was some Douglas Adams in there too. And I wrote it as far as I knew what happened – and then got sidetracked onto *Sandman*. Terry read it, and asked me a year on if I'd either sell it to him or write it with him, and I picked option B without missing a beat.

"And seeing that neither of us knew much about the book except for the Good Bits coming up, we just started writing them, and plotting it each day on the phone."

Gaiman and Pratchett are writers with extremely distinctive voices: so how did the collaborative voice emerge?

"Terry took that initial 5,000 words of mine and ran it through the computer



JACK COHEN

(because I'd lost the files in a computer crash) and made it the first 10,000 words, and it was definitely *Good Omens* at that point. Neither one thing nor the other, but a third thing.

"I think Terry could do a very good impersonation of me if he needed to, and I could do a very good impersonation of him; so we knew the area of the Venn diagram in which we were working. But mostly the book found its own voice very quickly. It helped that we were both scarred by the William books when we were kids.

"Some day academics are going to spend long and puzzling weeks figuring out the differences between the first Gollancz edition and later versions of the book."

It's clear both writers enjoyed the collaboration: so what made it such an engaging experience from Gaiman's point of view?

"The speed, and the idea that we were both doing it for fun. We didn't know if it was saleable – this is not some kind of false modesty, obviously we hoped a publisher would want it – which meant our intended audiences were very small. Mine was him, and his was me."

AND THERE'S MORE: IAN STEWART & JACK COHEN ON WORKING WITH TERRY PRATCHETT

The *Science of Discworld* books, written by Terry Pratchett, Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen, approach the link between science and cult fiction in a very different way to that of the usual non-fiction spin-off. Books linking scientific principals to Star Trek, Dr Who and Harry Potter have taken the line that the phenomena of these fictional worlds can be explained through the application of real scientific methods.

"But", says Professor Ian Stewart, "it doesn't really work. Terry's view is that providing a scientific explanation of Discworld goes against the whole set of principles on which he based the work. And he's right, of course: it all works on the basis of magic and the power of story. Dragons breathe fire simply because that's what dragons do."

The approach the collaborators took was an extravagant departure from the conventions of the sub-genre – and it worked wonderfully. The starting point for the series is that the wizards of Discworld are striving to come to an understanding of the non-magical principles of Roundworld – our Earth.

Professor Jack Cohen outlines his take on the authoring process: "One of us has an idea of the general frame – usually me – then Ian has the bells and whistles for it, and then Terry says 'no, we can't do that at all.' Then we go back and come up with another framework. I think we got through thirteen versions for the first book, and twenty for the second, before Terry said yes. They aren't thrown off on the spur of the moment by any means."

Cohen recalls the genesis of the series: "Ian and I were with Terry in an Indian restaurant. We'd given him a copy of our book *Figments of Reality*, which he'd given us a lot of help with. And Terry said to us 'do you want to mess about in my world like I've messed about in yours?' And at that point we decided it would be a good idea. We'd read *The Science of Star Trek* and decided we could do a hell of a lot better than that."

They did do better: the books are illuminating, unpatronising and enormously enjoyable. Stewart and Cohen wrote the hard science and Pratchett provided tailor-made short stories – good, canonical Discworld fiction – chopped into around twenty segments and interleaved with the longer science pieces. The science chapters are purely about real science on this planet, but they also constitute a commentary on the parody of Roundworld science conducted by the Wizards of Discworld.

"The Books had an impact on the mainstream Discworld books," says Ian Stewart. "For example, we've left a lasting mark on the Unseen University. But the science is not something that contrives scientific explanations for narrative elements that can't really be explained."

Cohen and Stewart's collaboration with Pratchett evolved through their established friendship. "It all came out of enjoying each other's company," Stewart tells me. "We had reasonably similar interests and politics – and

it was a lot of fun. Terry likes to run ideas past people to see what he can and cannot get away with in the books. When he's working on a novel he'll phone up and ask questions like: 'Can you think of a good mathematical reason that a really, really cold temperature might actually turn out to be a hot one?' Another enquiry was based on a bit in the Book of Revelation where it says heaven is a cube of a certain dimension. Terry phoned and asked me many people that would hold. I went into my mathematician's act and tried to come up with a plausible answer.

"Similarly, Jack and I asked Terry to read some of our popular science books in manuscript and to let us have his comments and advice. I am a mathematics researcher and I write popular science books. Working with Terry has affected both. His biggest influence has been to make me aware of the role of narrative and the power of story. For him, everything is driven by story. And I think this applies to science and maths: a good paper isn't just a mass of technical data, it tells a good story. My research papers these days tend to set the problem in terms of telling a story: even when it's a very technical piece of algebra I now think I'm doing storytelling. A well told story is a meme. It gets remembered and passed on.

"Jack and I have written two sf novels – *Wheeler* and *Heaven*. The second one is generally reckoned to be much stronger. And I would certainly give Terry a lot of credit for making me aware of things I wasn't previously aware of. I had a story published in *Analog* recently, and it's a story I couldn't have written a few years ago, because the characters are better developed. Terry's insights into the writing of stories have certainly affected the way I go about it. And I think I write more readable stories now."

Jack Cohen agrees that the collaboration has brought positive changes.

"We got a lot from Terry and he got a lot from us. I think working with Terry and Ian has been the funniest and most fruitful collaboration I've had. And it's changed my mind on a lot of things, but not in a way that's easy to put my finger on. It's not that I think more effectively, but I think it's enhanced the way I communicate. For example, it's always useful to ask an audience how many of them have read the books. That gives them an understanding of the fact that I'm out there with them: I'm not just some caricatured scientist in a lab."

The *Science of Discworld* series: *The Science of Discworld* (1999); *Science of Discworld II: The Globe* (2003); and *Darwin's Watch: Science of Discworld III* (August 2006).



THE PURRING OF CATS

story **Dave Hoing** ■ **Kenn Brown** image

The woman sits alone in the holding cell, her eyes transfixed on the observation window. This is a two-way mirror, and patients know it. For psychological reasons the Committee wants us to watch our subjects for a set period of time before approaching them. I've been a counselor my entire adult life and have yet to find any value in this practice. But the Committee feels that the act of being observed forces a response.

However, neither mirror nor glass is relevant in this woman's case: she appears to be staring at me, but clearly she sees nothing of the physical world. Isolated, unmoving, she is a quintessence of silence, her expression unfathomable. She might be looking at a beauty so stunning it has struck her dumb, a multiple sunset on Jaled Two perhaps, or a flight of angels; or she could as easily be viewing the latest horrors from the war front, those infamous holovids of our soldiers exuberantly smashing the heads of Denacian young against city walls. It's impossible to know from observation alone, but whatever drives her, *something* has this woman's undivided attention.

Her name is Nikki Teorson. Twenty-five years old, tall and pretty, with dark curly hair and green eyes, she's been convicted of 'having carnal relations with an exobiological species' – she had sex with an alien. It was a Srili, oddly enough;

odd because, although those innocuous folk resemble humans, they lack external genitalia, or any other visible gender characteristics. This isn't a capital offense, but it is a serious one, a notch worse, in the eyes of the law, than homosexuality.

The file of her life before her arrest contains nothing to indicate what might have led her to commit such a crime. Her childhood and adolescence were normal enough. She's held a number of jobs, including her most recent one as a computing specialist at the university. She's had no prior arrests, no previous counseling. Her separation from her husband rouses some interest, since troubles at home often lead one or both partners to seek answers elsewhere. I've seen this many times in my work; I've experienced it first-hand in my own life. She has no children.

"May I," I ask the monitor, "question the patient now? She isn't reacting to being watched."

There's a flaw in the speakers – replacements were requested months ago, but the war has meant rationing of technology – so static muffles the reply of the Committee's representative, a middle-aged woman whose name I don't know. "Prisoner, Doctor Jans," she corrects. I nod irritably at her image. The woman isn't in the same building, not even in the same city. "Good," she says. "Then please begin."

The Committee has its peculiarities, but once it gets past the observation nonsense and gives its permission to proceed, it no longer interferes in the investigation. The issue is not the guilt of the defendant, which has already been established, but whether or not to consider mitigating circumstances in pronouncing sentence.

The war makes everything problematic. If news reports are to be trusted, we're winning. Perhaps; but am I the only one to notice how our forces are constantly falling back? If the fighting does spread to our solar system, as I believe it will, then most of what I do will be made trivial. I can't, however, let that affect my approach to Nikki Teorson. Smiling, I open the door and enter the holding cell. "Hello, Nikki," I say. "My name is Doctor Patrick Jans. I'm here to talk to you about why you're here."

She responds to my voice by gradually losing her focus on the window. Her eyes dart about the room, as if trying to locate the source of the sound. When she finds me, and I'm right in front of her, her expression remains enigmatic. Her right hand paws absently at the folds of her left sleeve, smoothing the material against her skin. She hums the main melody from Lare's most famous composition, *The Orion Symphony*.

"Can you hear me, Nikki?" I say.

I know she can speak, I've seen the vids of her arrest and trial. In them



she displayed occasional flashes of real personality. But the Nikki Teorson of those vids is not present here today. The woman seated before me is a ghost, a shadow lost in some private deliberations to which I must somehow gain access.

The first step is to get her away from the menacing bleakness of the holding cell. It's standard procedure to transfer nonviolent prisoners to a minimum-security facility. The décor in some of those places is pleasant enough, which makes many patients feel more at ease, and therefore more open to questioning. I motion for a guard.

"I need you to talk to me, Nikki." If she doesn't, the Committee will likely sentence her to the full ten years.

The guard comes in and places restraints on her wrists and ankles. She doesn't resist but the rate of her breathing increases. I notice she isn't wearing a brassiere because her nipples harden and poke against the material of her blouse. Sexual arousal? Some people enjoy bondage, but I didn't expect such a response from her and, this early in the investigation, I won't read too much into it. Perhaps she's just cold or scared.

She was in leg shackles throughout her trial, but now she looks at her feet in confusion, as if she's forgotten how to walk. I help her stand and, supporting her elbow, nudge her forward.

Although she's a tall woman – her file lists her at just under one point eight meters – she feels tiny and fragile. I lead her outside to the waiting vehicle, then sit next to her behind the pilot. We lift off and zoom over the city toward the best of the facilities, which is also the one closest to my home. Nikki remains silent. Frustrated, I unfurl the onboard terminal from the console and call up her post-trial history.

Two entries might explain her distress. The day after she was arrested her husband served her with a divorce decree. Then, before the trial was even over, her parents swore out an affidavit to sever all legal ties to their daughter, officially disowning her. Nikki Teorson has been abandoned by her family. Aside from a brother, now dead, she has no siblings. There's no mention of aunts, uncles, or cousins.

I hear her gasp beside me. She's been reading the screen. I can feel her trembling. She looks directly at me now, her expression a litany of sorrow and desperation. From somewhere in her throat she emits a high-pitched whine, a scream building within. Her lips part

slowly. But she doesn't scream. Instead, in a voice barely audible, she leans into me and says, "Hold me."

I am a professional. I've counseled thousands of patients through situations far more dire than hers; I've maintained detachment in the face of the most grisly aberrations imaginable by human minds; I've taken, without flinching, the best shots of the worst people this society has ever produced. Yes, I've felt sympathy for many of my patients, empathy for a few – but I have never, *never*, been so moved by two words in my life. The hairs rise on my neck.

Hold me.

Without meaning to, this woman, this Nikki Teorson, has found an empty space inside of me and filled it with her own pain.

I actually reach for her, but before I can make contact, the pilot sets down in

you?" Clarence asks as he sets the vehicle down.

I do mind. He's a pleasant enough fellow, though not the kind of person I normally associate with. Still, it isn't snobbery that makes me decline his offer. I just want to be alone. I suggest another time, then decide to skip the club altogether. "Maybe I'll just go home," I say.

The lurid images of a holovid play before me in my living room, the sound turned off. I have no need for dialogue, only for motion to occupy my eyes. Karen, my wife, paces upstairs in the den that has become her sanctuary, her footsteps adding rhythm to the vid's silent dance. Some problem from work occupies her thoughts tonight, as most nights, a problem she won't choose to share with me.

She's a consultant for an architectural firm. We seldom see each other, and when

I read a study once about why cats purr. They purr when they're happy, of course, but they also do so when they're injured

front of the halfway house. His landing is smooth, but even the soft thud of wheels brushing pavement is enough to break the spell. I smile an apology.

She draws away. There's nothing to do now but take her inside and register her. It's nearly suppertime, too late to begin a session.

Afterward, I don't feel like going home, so I ask the pilot, Clarence, to drop me at a local nightclub. 'Nightclub' is the euphemism people use for a speakeasy. Alcohol for anything other than medicinal purposes has been illegal for more than a decade, as have all controlled substances.

"Hey, Doc," Clarence says, "d'you ever... *you know...* with any of your girl patients?"

Until a few moments ago I never wanted to. I pretend to be shocked. "No."

He winks back at me and chortles. "This one today, she screwed an alien, right?"

Her offense is a matter of public record, so I'm violating no confidences by discussing it. "Screwed isn't exactly the right word. The alien was a Srilii."

"No *shit*?" Them critters ain't even got dingers!"

I clear my throat. "Not that anyone has discovered, anyway."

"How does someone boink a Srilii, for chrissakes?"

"The logistics are difficult to visualize, yes?"

We arrive at the club. "Mind if I join

we do, it's for a few minutes late in the evening. Both of us are normally too tired to talk. Too tired, or simply disinclined. We've carved out niches for ourselves, Karen and me, each with a circle of dreams and ambitions, circles that widen daily but no longer intersect at any point.

She's threatened affairs several times and followed through on two. I've had one. We take each other back because it's convenient, because it's easier than starting over. Because we don't know how to divide the property. We have no children, so it's our *things* that keep us together.

Reclining in my chair, I pet Karen's cat, a calico called JayJay, and think about Nikki Teorson. I'm not easily given to flights of romanticism. Detachment is essential if I'm to be of any value to my patients. And yet there does seem to be a spark between certain people that can't be explained by textbooks, theories, or pheromones. This attraction isn't necessarily a sexual one, although that may be a part of it. I can't speak for Nikki, I only know that she's touched me deeply. I've felt this way before, once, and it was not with my wife, and never with one of my patients. That experience was exhilarating.

"But why now?" I say to JayJay, to the ghosts of the holovids.

In answer, JayJay licks her paws. Karen's footsteps break my reverie. She's

coming down for a snack, or her migraine medication. "Oh, Patrick," she says, "you're still up. Hi." And then she's gone. A clatter in the kitchen, a climbing of stairs, then the pacing in her den again.

The vid actors continue their dance.

Hold me. A lifetime of other people's problems has battered me into numbness. Now, after all these years, my emotions seem to be awakening. I sense a capacity for joy and, yes, for pain. Nikki Teorson, with two words, has made me *feel* again.

As I stroke JayJay's thick coat she begins to purr. It's a lovely sound. I close my eyes and listen to her, in and out, in and out, her every breath a sigh of contentment.

I read a study once about why cats purr. They purr when they're happy, of course, but they also do so when they're injured. The study was unable to explain this phenomenon, suggesting only that the purring might act as some kind of mantra

The pavement around the equipment is overrun with weeds. By the time I catch up to Nikki, she's hanging upside down from the monkey bars, her head nearly touching the ground. Her hair is flecked with dirt and bits of grass, and she's giggling like a little girl.

I have my first inkling about the root of her problem.

She abruptly abandons the monkey bars and scurries to the swings. Back and forth she glides, rising higher with each pass. Seeing my concern, she cries from the top of her arc, "Don't look so gloomy. I'm fine. This is fun."

And then she laughs, a magical, wonderful sound. Yesterday I was attracted to her sadness; today it's her joy.

I check my watch. The Committee allots exactly one hour per patient per session. Half of that time is already gone. I should speak with her, but today I'm content to

she could've chosen a Denaician. I hear they're hung like a horse."

I clench my hand into a fist. "If it was a Denaician she'd be dead now. They're the enemy. There *are* no mitigating circumstances for that."

"Then I'm sorry it wasn't a Denaician."

"I expected better from you, Karen."

"Funny," she says, "I got *exactly* what I expected from you."

I switch on the vidscreen in my bedroom before rising, as I do each morning, and am greeted with the news that Charon, the moon of Pluto, has exploded. A debris field has been indicated by Earth's orbital telescopes, but no further details are available because communications with the station orbiting Pluto have been disrupted.

A young reporter is trying to maintain her composure as she interviews

to focus the animal's mind away from its suffering.

I have no idea why this would occur to me now. I pet JayJay every day. But tonight I think of Karen, of myself, of Nikki Teorson, and I remember that cats also purr when they're in pain.

Nikki strolls through the garden outside the facility. The armed matron, Betty, eyes her from a discreet distance, making sure she doesn't try to scale the chain link fence that encloses the grounds. Nikki is supposed to be in her room for our session. Watching her sniff flowers and bask in the late afternoon sunshine, however, I'm not upset that Betty didn't bring her in. Maybe the change of scenery really has helped her.

"Nikki," I call from the doorway.

She brushes hair out of her face and smiles curiously. As I approach she picks a tulip from the garden and offers it to me.

"I'm here to talk to you about your case, Nikki."

Suddenly she frowns and spins away from me, dropping the tulip in the grass. The facility is a converted elementary school, and the plastic monkey bars and swings still stand, cracked and rough-edged. Nikki runs through the garden toward the equipment.

Betty, misunderstanding, draws her weapon. "Relax," I say. "She isn't going anywhere."

simply let her play. There's a war sweeping toward Earth, yes, and a report to be written, but neither is so pressing that I can't allow her a few moments of respite.

Monkey bars and swings may, after all, have more healing power than all my degrees and years of experience.

"For God's sake, Patrick, a *Srilii*?" Karen chuckles. She goes to the kitchen, raising her voice as she fixes a sandwich. "They don't even have a penis, do they?"

"That's why the Committee orders these profiles, to find out why people did the things they were convicted of."

"Why bring it up at all? You've never talked about your cases before."

"Nikki is different..."

"Ah." Karen comes out of the kitchen. She and I don't communicate much anymore, but her instinct hasn't failed. "Well, well, well," she whistles. "The Committee's going to have fun with that." She starts up the stairs.

"Karen, she needs my help."

"Don't they all?" She pauses. "What's so special about this one? Younger, prettier, perkier?" She folds her arms under her breasts, plumping them up to make them look bigger. "Or," she says, biting into her sandwich, "is it that she's fucked an alien? Does that *intrigue* you, my love?"

"This is ridiculous."

"Sex with a *Srilii*. Really, Patrick. At least

an astronomer from the university. "Collisions between celestial objects aren't uncommon," the astronomer explains, "but we saw nothing that would account for this. Our instruments would have detected anything large enough to destroy a moon, and certainly the station at Pluto should have seen it coming months or even years in advance. Yet no one did."

"Are you saying," the reporter says, "that the explosion wasn't *natural*?"

"I'm saying we don't know."

I turn off the news. So. The war has come to our solar system. This doesn't surprise me, but the news will be a shock to those who believe the Committee's propaganda that we're winning. People will no longer be able to think of the Denaicians as a collection of spectacular holovids from the front, beamed into their homes for an evening's entertainment. The Denaicians are real now, and reality is ugly.

I rise from my bed and run naked toward the stairs to give Karen the news. She's already down, though, sitting in my chair with JayJay in her lap and a cold compress on her forehead.

"Another migraine?" I ask.

"A bad one."

"Can I get you anything? Call a doctor?"

"I've taken my meds. It'll pass."

"You've heard about Charon?"

She peers out from under the compress. Eyeing my nudity, she musters a half-

smile. "You're not going to work like that, I hope?"

I look down and blush.

"Or is that," she says, "for Nikki?" The anger from last night is gone. All I hear in her voice now is resignation and migraine pain.

I return to my bedroom to dress. She's still in the chair when I come out. Her migraines are truly miserable. I stoop to kiss her on the forehead, an old habit.

"My bus should be here any minute," I say. "Hope you're feeling better."

As I open the door she clears her throat to get my attention. "I did hear about Charon," she says. Her eyes are again covered by the cold compress, so she's speaking into darkness.

"Why would they blow up the moon of Pluto?"

"I don't know."

"Patrick?"

"Yes?"

"War changes a lot of things, doesn't it?"

Yes, but. We can't blame the war for us. The airbus is just settling down across the street.

"See you tonight," I call, and rush out to get a seat.

The passengers are abuzz. At this moment the war is probably dominating conversations all over the planet. I gaze out the window on a city that may be in ruins soon. I force myself to focus on work. Sometimes the best answer to a crisis is to simply continue doing the things I've always done. Routines form the patterns and structures that give meaning to my life.

My day is partitioned into eight one-hour slots: four sessions with patients, travel and preparation time between each, plus lunch. The four patients are scattered about the city, housed in detention centers with various levels of security. One has been convicted of armed robbery, one rape, one arson, and the last, of course, is Nikki Teorson.

Sessions with nonviolent offenders are not videoed, but, for the protection of the counselors, those with dangerous convicts are. Today I'm glad of that. News of Charon's destruction has been withheld from the inmates, but word from outside always leaks in through channels only prisoners know. The first three, all men, are difficult under ordinary circumstances; today they're intolerable. They want to kill Denaicians. It isn't patriotism that stirs their passion, it's the prospect of getting out. They've heard rumors of a program

to send violent prisoners to the front, with a pardon offered to any who survive. Naturally, they want to join. It's absurd; the Committee would never agree to such an arrangement. Even if they did, I wouldn't have the authority to decide who goes and who doesn't. My job is to recommend for or against mitigating circumstances before sentencing, nothing more. When I tell them they'll have to make their request elsewhere, they become belligerent. My report to the Committee holds the real key to their futures. I can potentially get them shorter sentences and softer time, without *needing* to go to the front. But they're not interested in listening to reason.

So far it has been a wasted day.

Clarence pilots me to the facility where Nikki is staying. Exasperated and irritable, I can't honestly say if this appointment is for her sake or mine. After my argument with Karen last night, the news of Charon

not now. I *want* to touch her, and so cannot.

But the Committee demands a report, and she lies motionless on the bed. Without ringing for Betty, I tap Nikki on the shoulder. Surprisingly, this brief contact brings an immediate reaction. "Hold me," she says. "Please hold me..."

Against my better judgment, I do. There's no way to describe her desperation for my touch – for *any* touch – without lapsing into metaphor and cliché. She can't seem to get close enough to me. This behavior is confusing. She has, after all, been convicted of having sex with an *alien*. If human contact is what she wanted, any number of people would have been willing to accommodate her; she's an attractive woman. Instead she chose sex with a Srilii, a virtually sexless being.

I stroke her hair, but she pushes me away and sits back against the wall. "You

The passengers are abuzz. At this moment the war is probably dominating conversations all over the planet

this morning, and the troubles with my first three patients today, I look forward to the warm feelings Nikki gives me.

Any illusions I may have about that, however, fade as soon as I see her. The happy young woman I watched on the playground yesterday is now hunched into a fetal position on her bed, her eyes wide open but staring at nothing.

I ask Betty what happened.

"No idea," she says. "I was just chatting with her about my mother when all of a sudden she just sort of wilts onto the floor. I tried to bring her around but couldn't, so I lifted her onto the bed. She curled up like you see her now and hasn't moved since."

"Did you call a doctor?"

Betty shakes her head. "Why? They sometimes station me at the jail, so I saw her during her trial. She's done this before. Anyway, I knew you were coming."

When I hear the door shut, I perch on the bed next to Nikki. She doesn't respond to my voice. I try knocking on the bed frame next to her ear, with no better results. The way I've allowed myself to feel, I'm afraid to touch her. Touching is allowed if handled in a professional manner, which means calling Betty back in as a witness. Betty isn't the problem. For me to touch Nikki Teorson, for me to feel her loneliness and sadness and need, to measure them against my own, for me to do that and still maintain my detachment is not possible,

read about Vincent," she says after a moment.

Vincent is her ex-husband's name. "Do you know why he divorced you?"

"Because he couldn't stand my refusals. Because...because."

"It was your conviction, Nikki. That's what the divorce decree says. You had sexual relations with a Srilii. Do you want to talk about that?"

She goes limp and slumps sideways onto the bed. Her eyes are unblinking, her breathing shallow. She is no longer aware of me. "Nikki," I say, but she's retreated to her private universe again. This is her escape, a place she can go where the horrors of the real world can't reach her. When she's like this, I can't reach her, either.

My next act makes a lie of all my training and education, my life's work. Instead of helping her overcome her withdrawal, I exploit it. I kneel before her and caress the soft curves of her breasts. Her nipples harden against my palms, but she doesn't otherwise stir.

I immediately withdraw, but the damage has been done. Appalled, I bolt from the bed and stare at my hands as if they're foreign objects grafted onto my wrists. I'm supposed to help people, to heal them, but this is neither helping nor healing. Counselors have gone to prison, and rightly so, for less than this.

She probably isn't even aware of my transgression. Nevertheless, I crouch next to her and say, "Nikki, I'm so sorry."

As if that's enough.

Her eyes clear and begin to focus. The blankness of her expression is replaced by alarm, then fear. She looks at me as if I'm a stranger. And today, I am. To her, and to myself.

I back away to the door of her room, putting as much distance between us as possible.

She gazes at me with a perplexed look. "What," she says, "is your name?"

She isn't lucid. Her words aren't meant to be cruel, and yet they are. She doesn't remember, she doesn't remember my name.

I'm losing all perspective. Suppressing tears – *tears!* – I say, "Patrick Jans," leaving off the *Doctor*, and then, humiliated, I flee the room like a hormonal schoolboy who's

bends over and gazes at me from between her legs. Clarence hiccups. "Screw the Committee!" he drawls. He's in the mood to fight. His eyes glance around defiantly, daring anyone to challenge him. Nobody does.

"This is crazy," I say, sipping the beer. The stripper faces me again. She looks down at me as if she expects something, so I stuff a ten into the tiny cup covering her pubic area.

Although I can feel the silky hairs there, I could not be less aroused.

Clarence doesn't have that problem. He reaches up and pinches her bottom as she struts back toward the platform to entertain other customers. "Oh!" she squeals, without offense. She's used to it.

The war is coming. Things will end, *things*. What matters now, Doctor Jans?

Clarence slips off his stool. He rises quickly and straightens his clothes, trying

This is an honest offer, I believe. At least, I hear no malice in her voice, no sarcasm or revulsion. Still, she misses the point. She thinks it's enough to allow me to pleasure myself among the ghosts of forbidden vids.

She thinks that's enough.

"Never mind," I say. "I could have done that before you got home."

"I suppose," she shrugs, "but really, Patrick, there's a war. At a time like this, what could possibly be less important than fucking?"

"At a time like this, what could possibly be *more* important?"

"Maybe," she says, "Nikki could provide that. I have work to do." She ascends the stairs and is gone.

Well. Not old news yet, then, certainly not forgotten.

JayJay has curled herself into a vacant spot on my bookcase. "Here, kitty, kitty," I

just been jilted by his first crush.

"Those goddamn Denaicians," Clarence drawls into his cup. He belches loudly, his comment on the news of the day. Drink has slurred his language.

We're sitting at the bar. The atmosphere in these 'nightclubs' is dark and sleazy, the music loud and rough, the customers unsavory. The entertainment tonight is a stripper, for Christ's sake. And, of course, there's the alcohol, which is illegal. The Committee doesn't begrudge us the occasional purchase on the black market, as long as we drink at home, but it strenuously discourages flaunting the law in a common pub.

The waiter brings me an old-fashioned pilsner beer, served in an old-fashioned chilled mug. The dancer is taking her clothes off on a platform abutting the bar. She crosses onto the counter and plants herself directly in front of us.

Clarence yells something about the war at her pelvis.

The stripper purses her lips and blows me a kiss. She's probably the only other person in the place who isn't drunk.

I say nothing. There are implications, consequences, potential losses. There's Karen. The stripper shakes the tassels pasted to her nipples. It's Clarence who is leering at her, but this performance is definitely for me. She turns her back, then

to salvage his dignity. "Hey, Doc," he says, "that girl? I see the way you look at her. Why don'tcha just take her outta there? Screw the system. Just gimme the word, and I'll fly ya myself. Botha ya. Anywhere ya wanna go. Any time."

I watch a couple in the corner fondle and kiss each other, oblivious to the people around them. The stripper spreads her legs slightly, stroking her thigh. She winks at me, as if to say, *Do it, mister*.

I shouldn't be seen in a place where such public lewdness is tolerated.

Disgusted, I take another sip of beer.

I set the mug down.

I don't like beer.

Call it an act of contrition, but when Karen gets home I ask if she wants to make love. She responds as she always does: a shake of the head, an amused chuckle, "Oh, Patrick." Last night's argument is old news now, forgotten. We've both weathered infidelity crises before; she's apparently put this one behind her and settled into her old patterns. Perhaps to her Nikki is no more than a momentary glitch on the flat line of our relationship.

After grabbing a snack in the kitchen she climbs the stairs. Halfway up she stops and looks back. "Why don't you," she suggests, "put in one of your holovids? I'll stay in my den and turn up the music. I won't hear a thing."

call. She opens her eyes and blinks at me with feline disinterest. She doesn't come.

Alone, I retire to my state-of-the-art air flotation bed. My bedroom is the epitome of upper-class comfort. All the woodwork is real mahogany, the lattices brass. My acrylic windows are indistinguishable from glass. The latest in vidscreen technology occupies an entire wall, with a protruding stage upon which the holovid images come out and perform. On the adjacent wall hangs a very rare, very expensive oil reproduction of Dali's *Christ of Saint John of the Cross*. It's famous, of course, for its wonderful sense of perspective.

Most people will never own, never even see, a room like mine, a room stuffed with *things*.

I'll be a long time in falling asleep. I'll start several times in the night and wake in the morning exhausted. And every conscious moment, every dreaming one as well, will be filled with the name and the face and, oh yes, the breasts of Nikki Teorson.

The next morning a government spokesperson officially acknowledges the obvious: the Denaicians blew up Charon. But, she assures her viewers, it was a rogue squadron and not the entire fleet. "There is nothing to fear," she says, pointing at a star chart to an area near the Horse Head

Nebula. "The war front is where it has always been, light-years away. Earth is in no danger. Strategic Alliance has sent a large force, represented by all members of the Eight Societies, to Pluto to meet and destroy this squadron."

Truth or public relations nonsense?

Looking at the star chart, I'm astounded that it's only been a little more than a hundred years since humans first set foot on our own moon. Then one of the Seven found us, gave us new technology, invited us to make it Eight, and suddenly we're galactic wayfarers. Amazing.

I'm curious, though, what we bring to the table in this relationship. The Seven have been at war with the Denaicians for some time. In my more cynical moments I wonder if we weren't just needed as fodder.

Flicking off the vidscreen, I quickly rise, dress, and rush out to the kitchen for a light breakfast. Karen is in my chair with JayJay again. Her eyes are red and puffy, but not from a migraine. She's been crying. I'm in too much of a hurry to ask why; my bus will be here any minute. Instead I simply brush by her and pop a jelly biscuit in the mic. After gulping it down, I run to the door, straightening my tie as I go.

"Patrick," she sniffles, "don't leave."

"I'll miss my bus," I say. I open the door. "Can we talk?"

The bus is already on the street. "No time. Tonight," I say, slamming the door behind me. The pilot is just starting to lift off when he sees me waving and sets down again. "Thanks," I say as I climb aboard.

"Tomorrow, asshole, I'm leaving without you. Some people got a schedule to keep."

Tomorrow will be a different day entirely, I think. Clarence says he will fly Nikki and me anywhere I choose. Although I'm tempted to accept, I'm too conservative for such a drastic step, or perhaps too timid. There's another way to get her out, a legal one. It's rare but not unprecedented. With particularly delicate cases, if there's no danger to society, the Committee will sometimes release a patient to a counselor's personal custody, a temporary relocation to private housing. Naturally, if a member of the opposite sex is involved, an appropriate chaperone is required.

I'm aware of twenty or so cases where this kind of request was approved. Of these only one backfired and the patient got away. Had the counselor not committed suicide afterward, she almost certainly would have gone to jail for gross negligence.

There are forms to fill out, of course.

There are questions and justifications, both written and oral. There are vouchers to sign, medical documentation to obtain, monetary securities to arrange. There's an endless stream of red tape to cut through as the request filters its way through the Committee's bulky bureaucracy.

And then there's waiting.

I have the bus drop me at a real estate office, where I take out a lease on a flat in the city's high-rise district. If the Committee approves my request, I can't bring Nikki home, of course. Although Karen would be the ideal surrogate chaperone, that's not a favor I can ask of her.

That business completed, I catch a cab the rest of the way to work. I cancel all of my appointments for the day, save the last one, and prepare to spend the next several hours arguing my petition before a vidscreen linkup with the Committee.

into my custody, I'll need to function not only as her counselor but as her guardian. I'll assume complete responsibility for her care, her security, and her eventual return once my report is finished and the Committee is ready to pronounce sentence. I'll ask Betty to be the chaperone, because I can trust her discretion. She'll only have to be there at night, after her regular duties are done. That'll mean overtime pay for her, and days alone with Nikki for me. Everybody wins.

The speed with which events transpired today has left me nearly two hours before my session at the halfway house. This gives me a chance to catch a cab to the flat I just leased.

Located on an upper floor of an immense skyscraper, it's quite small: two bedrooms – one for me and one for Betty and Nikki to share – one bathroom, a kitchen, and a living room.

Today she remembers my name. There's a freshness about her I haven't seen before, even on the playground

I ask for the link through the appointments secretary program, a computer with a maddeningly human talent for obfuscation. It's necessary to do this first thing in the morning if you hope to communicate with the Committee by the end of the day. While I wait, I call up all the forms on my office terminal, and rehearse what I'll say as I enter the required data online.

Amazingly, within an hour the secretary pops up on my screen and announces that a linkup has been arranged. I finish the forms, then make my case to eight impassive faces on a screen. These are not the actual Committee members, but a subgroup of a subgroup of representatives who advise proxies of the members. The Teorson case is not high on the Committee's list of priorities. The faces who will weigh my argument thank me, betraying no hint of their thoughts, but incredibly, promise a decision by the next day. Usually this process – *any* process in which the government is involved – takes much longer, but the destruction of Charon has accelerated a lot of agendas. My request is probably trivial to them, and they want to get it out of the way as quickly as possible.

If their decision is yes, then all my other cases will be reassigned and I'll be expected to devote my full attention to Nikki. This is reasonable because, if she is released

Hardly luxurious, but it's comfortable, it's furnished, and it has a balcony that offers a dazzling view of the city. I lean on the railing to peer down through a shimmering haze at pedestrian streets thin as threads, at people no larger than commas, at the beautiful expanse of greenery that is the city's dominant feature. The park, even at this height, seems to stretch out forever.

To my delight, a peregrine falcon has made her nest in a nook under the balcony above mine. Her hatchlings are cheeping for food.

I'm pleased with the flat. It isn't home, however, and that means a major adjustment; for no matter how the Committee chooses, I've made a decision of my own.

Music is playing behind Nikki's door. It's available to anybody who wants it, piped in through audiogrids that adorn the walls of each room. Betty tells me this is the first time Nikki has asked for it. The music is majestic. I recognize it as the choral work of some Baroque or Classical composer (I can never recall which is which). Nikki is singing along with it. Her file doesn't include anything about musical aptitude or training; nevertheless, she's a natural soprano, and a good one. Her voice soars to the high notes with a beauty and purity that would do credit to the city's finest divas.

I would be satisfied to stand in the hall and listen, but until the Committee approves my request I'm still allotted one hour per session. Nikki stops singing when I enter. She smiles. "Oh, hi, Doctor Jans."

Today she remembers my name. There's a freshness about her I haven't seen before, even on the playground. Some of her personal effects were brought to her this morning. She's changed into a blue mid-length dress that accentuates her femininity; her hair has been washed and teased so that the curls hang seductively over one eye; and she's wearing makeup. I'm not overly fond of the use of makeup, but the fact that she took the time to put it on indicates she cares about her appearance, and that's an encouraging sign.

"Hello, Nikki, you look very pretty –" She touches her finger to her lips. "Shhh, I like this part."

The music swells to a crescendo, orchestra and voices blending in perfect balance, melodies and counter-melodies weaving harmonically until the piece's magnificent climax and final coda.

"You sing well," I say when it's over.

"Handel," she says with a blush. "I can play the piano, too."

"Nikki, you know why I'm here. Unless I can give the Committee a reason not to, they're going to sentence you to the maximum, ten years."

Her mood instantly shifts. She answers petulantly, "Do you think I care about that?"

"You should," I say.

"Maybe you have family to go home to. I don't."

Since she brought the subject up, I ask about her parents and her brother.

"My parents," she says, "think I'm a pervert. They hate me. My brother is dead. What else do you want to know?"

"Anything you'd like to share, Nikki."

"That's all there is." When another composition starts playing, Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*, Nikki pounds on the grid and yells, "Turn it off, turn it off!" She spins around and jabs a finger at me. "Look," she says, her voice rising to fill the new silence in the room, "will the Committee let me go if I make up a good story?"

I'm surprised by her sudden anger. "They'd rather have the truth."

"How are they going to know? And what about you? What do you want?"

"Tell me about the Srilii –"

"You mean why I did it," she says, softly and bitterly, "or if I enjoyed it?"

"Nikki, this is my job. I have to ask these questions. Legally, having sex with a Srilii is no better or worse than with any other alien species. The law doesn't distinguish between them, except of course for the Denaicians. But the Committee is curious –"

"You mean you're curious."

I sigh. "The Committee is curious why you picked a Srilii. With no outward gender characteristics, it seems an odd choice."

Nikki gapes at me as if I'm the most ignorant man alive. "Doctor Jans," she says, "I picked the Srilii because it has no gender."

I didn't expect that, and I'm afraid my

and smoked a whole pack. I let the ashes fall on my stomach. When that didn't hurt enough I put the cigarettes out on my skin. I still have the scars there." She unbuttons her dress to show me.

The burns are in her medical report, unexplained.

"Nikki, please, you don't have to do that," I say, but she leaves the dress undone. "Why did you want to die?"

She curls into her familiar fetal ball. "Heroes," she whispers, "aren't always so heroic."

"You mean your brother?"

"He used to touch me. When I was little. When my parents were gone. He'd make me take off my clothes, then tie me to the piano bench and do things to me. Then he'd leave me there, tied up for the longest time. Naked. He wouldn't let me go until my parents were coming up the walk. I'd have to grab my clothes and run into the

surprise shows. "If you wanted sex –"

"Isn't it enough that I've lost everything because of it? That Vincent divorced me? That my parents tell everyone they don't have any children anymore? Isn't that enough?" She sits down on her bed and cries. "Just leave me alone."

I remain standing. I'm determined to keep her talking, even if it means changing the subject. Clearly, she still finds the Srilii episode too painful. "What was your brother's name?"

"Jerry." She wipes her nose on the back of her hand. I give her my handkerchief.

She sniffls and stops crying.

"How did he die?"

"Drowned trying to save an old woman. Everybody thinks he was a hero."

"Wasn't he?"

She turns her face away from me. For a moment I'm afraid I'll lose her again, but then she looks up, so sad, so sad. She has such beautiful green eyes. "I tried to kill myself once. Pills. Vincent made me throw up, then helped me walk it off. This was before we got married. He loved me so much then, and I didn't deserve it."

"A suicide attempt should have been in your medical record –"

"There isn't any medical record. I wouldn't go to the hospital." She pauses as if catching her breath. "I burnt myself with cigarettes once, too. Before they were illegal. I laid down in an empty bathtub

bathroom. He thought it was funny."

With this confession she completely loses control of her emotions and weeps so hard she can no longer speak.

Of course. I'd begun to suspect something like this when I saw Nikki playing on schoolyard equipment. Shit. I've seen this a thousand times in my career. You never get used to it. Never. If true, however, it's the mitigating circumstances the Committee requires. No wonder she turned to an alien species; she couldn't trust humans. "Jerry was older than you?"

"Nine years."

"Did your parents know?"

"I was so ashamed. I loved my brother."

Her nipples have hardened again. She cannot, can not, be enjoying this memory. "So you never told them?"

"How could I? I was too embarrassed then, and now Jerry's dead. Trying to save an old woman. How do you tell your parents that their darling, dead hero of a son was a monster?"

"They need to know –"

"No! He's dead. Let them remember him the way they want to."

"What about you, Nikki? All they see is what you did with the Srilii, and it's breaking their hearts. Maybe if they knew the truth..."

"It doesn't matter. I did what I did. They blame themselves. But Jerry... To them he was wonderful. At least now they can point

to him and say they did one thing right. One thing. It'd kill them to find out what he was really like. I can't do that. It's easier to let them hate me."

"Haven't you suffered enough?"

"Haven't they?"

"Nikki, if the Committee is going to reduce your sentence, your parents are going to have to know about this. It'll come out in the vids."

She responds with a brief silence, then her mood changes again. "Doctor Jans?" she says. "Ask them to put the music back on." She turns her back on me on the bed; apparently this part of our conversation is over.

I speak into the audiogrid and this time get a purely orchestral piece.

"Dvorak's *New World Symphony*," she says. "Will you hold me?"

"I shouldn't," I say.

"You touched me yesterday." Her fingers brush her breasts. "Here."

Christ. I feel sick to my stomach. You're an abuser, too, Doctor Jans, you – no. No! I tend to face unpleasantness about myself in third person. Not this time. Not now. I am an abuser. I am.

Jerry is dead; he's either gotten his punishment or he's beyond it. But I am very much alive. Alive, and certainly *not* beyond punishment. "Nikki, I'm so sorry. I'll take myself off your case –"

"No. Don't be sorry. I liked it."

She *liked* it? She *liked* it? I start to say something idiotic, but she stops me.

"Sometimes," she says, "it *does* bother me to be touched. I get so scared I can't move. Vincent didn't understand. He always took it so personally."

"My conduct was inexcusable, Nikki. Don't tell me you *liked* it, don't."

"Why not? I'm not scared *all* the time." She takes my hand and examines it as a blind person might, gently stroking the folds of the palm, the fingers, the nails, the tiny hairs. She touches my fingertips to her lips but doesn't kiss them. Then she places my hand on her chest. "It's okay," she says.

And so again, with her consent this time, I caress her breasts. There's little more I can do today, however. Her session is nearly over, and the Committee is strict about its one-hour limit.

I can't believe how far I've fallen, how unclean I feel, how lost I am. And yet I've already rented the flat.

Pornographic holovids are available which depict liaisons between humans and aliens from all members of the Eight Societies –

except Srilii. I suspect that, since they lack genitalia, nobody finds them sufficiently interesting to digitalize.

Like alcohol, drugs, and cigarettes, pornography is illegal. There are heavy penalties for its production, distribution, sale, and possession, but that hasn't slowed the demand for it on the black market. Although no statistics are kept, the most popular specialty holovids are almost certainly the ones featuring human/alien couplings.

I confess to a certain fascination for them myself, and I have an advantage over other people: as a counselor I am legally entitled to own pornography. The theory is that it helps me to better understand the quirks of human nature. The truth is somewhat more sordid. I *like* them, and I watch them for reasons that have nothing to do with my work.

Many nights, while Karen paces

"If she doesn't want to, I won't force her."

"Or the Committee could turn you down."

"Yes, obviously, they could do that. But –" I pause, swallow, clench my teeth. Although I'm confident of my decision, it's difficult to put into words, to say aloud to my wife, to the woman with whom I've spent the past two decades – but I'm moving out, regardless."

She doesn't speak for several moments. Caught off guard, she doesn't know how to react. Then she abruptly tosses the cat onto the floor and lifts her eyes to me in disbelief. On a practical level, my absence won't change her life much. There's been little contact between us, physical or emotional, for years. She knows our marriage isn't working, but I think she's always believed that she would be the one to go first, which in her mind gives her control over our relationship.

For the Denaicians to get a message past our com people to the news services' satellite, they'd have to be a lot closer than Pluto

through her separate existence upstairs, I examine my own quirks before these erotic images. For some years they have been my sole outlet for sexual release, but in these past few days even this pleasure has been denied me. I see Nikki in the face of every actress who performs with an alien, panting with feigned enthusiasm at each inhuman caress. I am repulsed by the knowledge of what she's done, and by the fact that once I would have enjoyed watching her do it.

Karen stares grimly at my suitcases. She reclines on the couch in the living room, with JayJay contentedly purring in her lap. I've just told her about the flat I leased and my intention, if the Committee approves, to move in with Nikki.

"Just you and her?"

"Betty would be there nights."

"How inconvenient for you. Or would she join the fun? Does Nikki know?"

"I haven't told her yet. I didn't want to get her hopes up in case the Committee says no."

"Isn't that a little presumptuous?" Karen's voice is calm, but her expression betrays her sadness and anger and, perhaps, her fear as she realizes that this time really is the end. "What if she doesn't want to live with you?"

"This is my job, Karen. It's therapy –" "Bullshit."

JayJay rubs her whiskers against my leg and meows. I reach down to scratch the scruff of her neck. I look at Karen. "I'll send a check every month so you can keep the house."

"I don't care about the goddamned house! Don't do this."

Seeing her distress, my resolve falters. But I close that sentimental loophole by falling back on the detachment that has defined my life. "Karen," I say, "why do I have to threaten to leave before you'll ask me to stay?" I point to the stairs. "We haven't been *us* since you moved up there."

She sniffls and composes herself. "This is so out of character, Patrick. You know this...this experiment...with Nikki will fail. You *know* it will. Jesus, the Committee will probably send her to prison."

She's right, but that's not the point. "I'm tired of playing it safe," I say. "I'm tired of comfortable apathy. We don't know how this war is going to end. I don't want to spend my last moments cowering in this house, hoarding my *things* and wondering if there shouldn't have been something more to my life."

She stands up. "I'm sorry for you, Patrick. You're in for terrible grief, and it will all be for nothing."

She can't be happy, can't want to continue in this numbing, meaningless charade. But she turns her back, as she always has, and walks toward the stairs.

Her posture is a declaration of finality that puts the lie to my pretense of detachment.

"Karen," I whisper, but it's too late. She is gone from me, and I from her.

It's done, then.

I flop onto my chair and eye my suitcases. JayJay has climbed on top of them and curled up for a nap. Funny how irrelevant thoughts cross the mind in times of stress, but I'm going to miss that cat.

It's early; the sun isn't up yet. I lie in my bed and stare at the Dali reproduction, in which a crucified Jesus floats in a black sky over boatmen in a harbor. I don't normally care much for surrealism, but I've always admired the detail, the composition, and especially the sense of perspective in *Christ of Saint John of the Cross*. Dali had been dead nearly forty years when I was born, yet it's almost as if he created this painting as a personal reminder to me: Perspective,

for God's sake. Crying. I wipe away the tears and step outside. The cabbie's face is flushed with anger. "Listen, pal," he scowls, "if you call a car, dammit, be ready when it comes."

He either doesn't notice, or chooses to ignore, my red eyes.

"I'll pay you for your time," I say, as unconcerned about his anger as he is about my distress. "I have suitcases."

He grudgingly helps me carry my luggage to the cab. Once those are stowed I climb in on the passenger's side next to him and tell him the address.

His ire quickly fades and he becomes more somber. Apologizing for his temper, he says, "Bad night. Just found out the Denaicians got the station orbiting Pluto, too. Everybody's dead. My nephew was a technician there."

Some people *do* have problems worse than mine. Under other circumstances I

tip. Soon money will become an issue, but for the moment my finances are sound. I give him an extra twenty when he drops me off at the office. A few minutes early for my first appointment, I use the time to register my new address and number with the correction department secretary (an actual human being), then call up my messages to see if the Committee has rendered its decision. Nothing yet, which is hardly surprising, considering the hour.

I check my docket and find all the usual suspects. I still have a little time, so I go to the break room to relax and think.

Two night custodians are just about to check out. They're discussing the latest developments in the war when I come in.

"Hi, fellas," I say, smiling through weariness and uncertainty.

"You probably heard about the station at Pluto," says the shorter of the two, "but did you know the fighting's reached Jupiter?"

Doctor Jans. Perspective.

Of all my possessions, this is the one I most want to keep. However, there'll be little room for luxuries where I'm going. I'll leave it for Karen, with the uneasy knowledge that she may need to sell it if money gets tight.

I rise and dress, then call a cab to fly me to my new dwelling, the flat with the beautiful view, high in a skyscraper. With the peregrine and her hatchlings. With, perhaps, Nikki Teorson.

I carry my suitcases to the door and pace anxiously, soaking in the sights of my old comfortable life. The sheer accumulation of *things* is staggering. The idealism of love be damned, these are difficult to leave behind.

The cabbie is already pounding his horn as he sets down outside my front door. I consider waking Karen to say goodbye, but decide against it. Instead I jot down a quick note and stick it to the refrigerator. No point in a melodramatic pep talk, it would be in poor taste. The note reads simply, *Be happy and well. Patrick*. It's a pathetic goodbye, but anything more would be hypocritical.

Finally I look for JayJay, without success. It appears she will deny me even that small goodbye. She's probably up sleeping with Karen, who needs the company more than I do.

The doorbell rings, and I'm crying.

would slip into my counselor mode and encourage him to talk about it. Now, "I'm sorry," is the best I can do. After a few kilometers of silence, I say, "When did you hear that?"

"Been on the news all night. The Denaicians snaked a message to the news services through a communication satellite, accusing us of atrocities. *Us!* So the Committee ran the bastards' message – right after they announced the slaughter of all those unarmed people on our Pluto station. And *we're* the savages?"

While I sympathize with his sentiments, I believe criticism is warranted on both sides. I recoil in horror every time I see those infamous holovids of our soldiers, *ours*, gleefully slaughtering Denaician young. And what about the atrocities we humans commit against each other every day? The murders, the rapes, the arsons? The brother who binds his naked sister to a piano bench and *does things to her*? The husband who walks out on his wife on the pretext of finding love?

Oh, yes, there is cruelty in the world. And there is pain; and we, the *civilized* species, do so enjoy inflicting it.

The sun is just peering over the city's skyline when we arrive at my new home. There's no time to unpack and settle in before work, so I ask the cabbie to wait while I shower and change clothes. He agrees, no doubt expecting a substantial

That ain't any rogue squadron!"

The second man agrees. "You tell me how a *rogue squadron* gets past Strategic Alliance all the way to Jupiter."

I'm not surprised. In fact, I suspect the situation is worse. For the Denaicians to get a message past our com people to the news services' satellite, they'd have to be a hell of a lot closer than Pluto. And if the government is admitting they've made it to Jupiter, then they're probably at Mars.

"That hyperdrive shit gives me the creeps," the short one says. "Without it, that trip takes, what, three years, four? Now it's two hours, or two minutes, whatever. Jesus."

I have no idea about the mechanics behind faster-than-light travel, nor even the distances between planets. Physics and astronomy were never interests of mine. Why delve into the outer reaches when there's so much to explore here, inside our own minds? Then again, there have never been Denaicians attacking our solar system before.

Yes, Karen, war changes a lot of things.

I grab a biscuit out of the processor and excuse myself to fly to my first appointment. Neither that session nor the one that follows are productive. The patients are determined I can get them out to fight at the front. *Just wait*, I think, *the front is coming to us*. I don't tell them this, however, nor that, regrettably, their

hostility and uncooperativeness will make it necessary for me to recommend against mitigating circumstances.

I have three hours until my next appointment. I catch a ride from Clarence, who just dropped off another counselor to see a patient near here. As he lands in the street in front of the skyscraper – it would be easier to lower me directly onto my balcony, but that's illegal – he asks if I've thought about his proposition. My mind being on other things, I don't recall what his proposition was, so I simply nod and say, "I'll let you know." It isn't until I'm half way up the skylift that I remember he said he'd fly Nikki and me away. Since he was drunk when he'd made the offer, I never expected him to follow through. Good old Clarence.

The flat is furnished with the bare essentials, but it doesn't have a vidscreen. Fortunately, I have a small receiver in my watch. I listen to it as I open my suitcases and start to put my new life in order. According to official government press releases, most of the Deniaician squadron was destroyed near Pluto, but a few slipped into hyperdrive and escaped. The Strategic Alliances ran them down at Io, where the stragglers were surrounded and obliterated. "Like shooting cattle in a pen," the announcer chuckles, clearly amused by her out-of-date metaphor. The danger, she gushes, is over.

Really? *Somebody* got close enough to send a message through a comsat, and that somebody wasn't human.

Once everything is put away, I stash the empty suitcases in a closet and walk out onto the balcony. The panoramic view of the park is breathtaking, its unstructured greenery a lovely counterpoint to the city's bleak geometry of concrete and steel. Directly below me the streets are alive with activity, thousands of pedestrians going about their business while cabs, buses and personal vehicles buzz by over their heads. There is little evidence of the panic I saw when news of the attack on Charon was first broadcast. Perhaps everyone believes, or wants to believe, this morning's stories coming in from Io.

Suddenly drowsy, I yawn and come in off the balcony. I didn't sleep much last night. I lie down, intending only to rest my eyes. The bed is a normal four-poster affair with a hard spring mattress, very uncomfortable compared to my flotation bed. I'm still agitated and don't expect to doze off; but when I open my eyes again two hours have passed. I summon a cab, stop at a nearby

deli for a bite, then hurry to my next appointment.

Anticipating Nikki, I find myself going through the motions with this patient in order to wrap up his case. If the Committee decides to reduce his sentence, I can honestly claim I helped him. If not, I can say I tried and walk out of his life untainted by a guilty conscience. Either way, I won't be seeing this one again.

Nikki is wearing a pink satin blouse and black dress slacks, very attractive. She stands with her back to the door, unmoving, although I can tell by her posture that she isn't having one of her spells; rather, she seems enthralled by the music wafting in through the audiogrid. It's Laré's enchanting *Orion Symphony* again.

As I approach I make sure she hears me so I won't startle her. "Hi, Doctor Jans," she says without turning. "Hug?"

I'm trained to understand human nature, sometimes even to predict it, yet this assertiveness takes me by surprise. I recoil, which Nikki interprets as rejection.

"You don't want me?" she says.

"I want you too much."

She steps away from me. Without a word she begins to unbutton her blouse, her eyes never leaving mine.

"Nikki," I say, "we can't. There's no lock on this side of the door."

"Don't treat me like a cripple because of Jerry," she says. "Do I have to pay for what he did to me for the rest of my life?"

"You shouldn't have to pay at all –"

"Why is everybody so goddamned careful with me?" She finishes the last button and lets her blouse slip off her shoulders. Her breasts are small, her erect nipples dark circles against their whiteness. She glares at me defiantly, daring me to tell her to put her blouse back on.

She twirls to face me, wrapping her arms around my neck and swaying in time to the music. I can't recall the last time I danced

I embrace her from behind, crossing my arms under her breasts and resting my chin on the curve of her shoulder. The mixture of her perfume and hairspray are at odds with one another but nevertheless form an enticing blend.

"I like this," she says.

I like it, too.

She twirls to face me, wrapping her arms around my neck and swaying in time to the music. I can't recall the last time I danced. The grids are too primitive to capture the subtleties of Laré's synthesizers, but still the music is arresting, swelling and diminishing, evoking an emotional journey through space and time. Laré pioneered the discordant harmonies that dominate modern composition. The main motif in this symphony is easily one of the five or six most recognized themes in the world. It's an absolutely haunting work that simultaneously conveys sadness and joy. Nikki must have requested this music, for it's entirely too appropriate to our situation to have been a random choice by the facility's staff.

The music, the dancing, and the closeness combine to create an unmistakable sexual tension in the room. We both sense it. She looks at me expectantly. "Patrick," she says, the first time she has used my given name; and then she kisses me, not the chaste, tender kiss of a friend, but the ardent kiss of a lover.

I don't.

Her anger evaporates as quickly as it flared. "Lay with me." She leads me to the bed. I start to remove my tie, but she stops me. "No," she says.

The bed is a single, not intended for two. I stretch out with my back against the wall, making room for Nikki to snuggle into my arms. The feel of her naked skin is intoxicating. She is obviously becoming aroused, and so am I. As we kiss again it's difficult to remember how fragile she is.

She guides my hands to her breasts and moans when I massage them. At this moment my scheme doesn't seem so outrageous, so improbable, so doomed. There is cruelty in human nature, yes, but there is also tenderness. Jerry did things to Nikki; I want to do things for her. And what she's done for me, what she's doing for me, is to inject life into the emotional neurons of my brain, neurons that have been dormant for years. She has resurrected the dead. *I feel, I want to cry, I feel I feel I feel!*

"This is so...normal," she says. She pulls my face to hers and kisses me, hard, almost desperately. Our chests and hips grind together. "Patrick," she pants, "we either have to stop or keep going."

I take this as permission to proceed, but as I slide my fingers down her bare stomach to unfasten her slacks she inhales sharply. Her body stiffens and the

trembling of desire gives way to spasms of panic. "No," she whimpers, and "I'm sorry," and "Don't," and "I can't."

I withdraw my hand immediately, but too late. Her eyes pop wide open, she gapes, and then she is gone into her insulating silence.

Nikki, no. I jump out of the bed and look down at her motionless form. I have done this to her, I have. "I'm sorry," I say.

Amazingly, she answers. "Don't blame yourself," she says, her voice small and distant, as if wafting through a deep void. "I thought I'd be okay this time."

I cover her with her blouse. "Vincent got so frustrated with me," she says. "I'd let him touch my breasts, they're safe, but...but some parts of me were more abused than others."

Her face betrays no emotion, her mouth barely moves. She might be reciting a laundry list. I'm not deceived by her

people speak excellent English, you know. He was very nice, very understanding. Maybe they don't have child abuse or bad marriages where he comes from. When he'd fixed the system he asked if I wanted to get something to eat. I said sure. Well, that really amounted to him watching me eat, because Srilii don't have much of a taste for our food. Then we went to his place."

I know what's coming. Nervous but fascinated, I pull up a chair and sit on it backwards with my arms crossed over its back.

"I felt so comfortable with him," Nikki says, "so safe. I wasn't scared with him like I am with people. He didn't say one word about himself, but still I thought he was the most interesting...being?...I'd ever met. I was attracted to him right away, and, yes, I'm sure it was *because* he had no sex."

She waits for me to comment, but for now I'm content to listen. "Go on," I say.

like an energy came out of his body and into mine, and then back out again, over and over, like I was ebbing and flowing with internal heat. I know what normal lovemaking is supposed to be like, one small part of a man going in and out of one small part of a woman. But with a Srilii, it's like his entire body and soul are converging with your body and soul, and then separating, and then converging... I really can't describe it. It was *wonderful*. That night was the only time I've ever come without masturbating."

I feel a twinge of jealousy. It's an altogether childish reaction for a man of my age and experience. There's no emotion more worthless or destructive than jealousy, unless it is undeserved guilt.

"What do you think about it now?" I ask.

"I hoped I was healed," she says, staring forlornly at her feet. "I hoped he had cured me of Jerry." Nikki sighs in disgust. "It was

apparent calmness: Nikki Teorson is in agony. There's a reason why counselors aren't supposed to become involved with their patients.

"Vincent was right for leaving," she says. "I'm poison."

"Nikki," I say, gently shaking her shoulder. "You need to get dressed, our session is almost over."

Her eyes flutter. "Doctor Jans? Patrick? Talk to me, don't let me go away. I'm afraid someday I'll get trapped in silence forever."

And so I talk, rambling on about Karen and JayJay and the house; about my plans, should the Committee approve, to take Nikki to the flat; about the war and the Denaicians and Charon and Io. Gradually she stirs, like a person emerging from a long coma. She blinks and sits up, gazing curiously at the blouse draped over her shoulder. Then she remembers. Mouthing a silent, *Oh*, she puts it back on.

"You have a cat?" she asks. Before I can answer, she says abruptly, "The Srilii was a computer technician called in by the university when our system crashed. You knew I was a specialist there? Anyway, Vincent and I were having troubles, I guess you know why, and I was telling the Srilii – I'll call him a *him* – about it. I'd never seen him before, never even learned his name, but there I was blabbing all my personal problems while he tried to find out what was wrong with the system. His

"We were sitting at opposite ends of the couch, and I found myself sliding closer and closer to him. Pretty soon I kissed him, just like that, just for the fun of it. He didn't encourage me, but he didn't resist, either. I felt so *free*, like I could do anything with him and it would be okay. One thing led to another, and before I knew it, we were naked."

No music is coming through the grid; *The Orion Symphony* is over. "Have you ever," Nikki says, "seen a naked Srilii, Patrick?"

I shake my head. Not even in my holovids.

"It's the most amazing thing. Everything they've got looks pretty much like ours, except they don't have nipples and they don't have genitals. Nothing. It's sort of smooth down there, curved a little, and hairless. From a distance I guess you'd say they look more like a woman below the waist, but up close there's just...nothing.

"I couldn't resist the urge to touch it. I would have kissed him there, too, but he said the area has no special sensitivity. Then he said, 'Let me show you how we do it,' and he – he *folded* himself around me. I mean, he was shorter and skinnier than me, yet I would have sworn I could feel his body surrounding me on all sides. Once we were lying down we didn't move the whole time, not a muscle. But the feelings he gave me, Patrick, the *feelings*! It was

a *stupid* thing to hope."

"Because you were caught." I nudge the chair closer to her and touch her shoulder. "I was given the trial vids when your case was assigned to me."

"They videoed us through the window, is what they did," she says. "My god, who'd have thought they'd spy on an *ally*? Well, the perverts didn't get much of a show. All we would have looked like was two naked people lying on a couch. No pumping or thrusting or anything. But we *were* naked, so the police broke in and arrested me."

"But not him?" I never thought to follow up on what happened to the Srilii.

"No. Diplomatic immunity, or something like that. He was deported. I don't know what his people did to him. All I know is that going through our courts is like being raped all over again, only with people gawking at you. They treated me like a *whore*. Then I lost Vincent and my parents..."

Nikki shows signs of retreating into her private universe again. I sit next to her and put my arm around her. She cannot go to prison, she can *not*! She claims she doesn't care about that, but she doesn't realize the staggering number of sexual assaults that happen there, gang rapes committed by members of her own sex. That would devastate her beyond any chance of redemption. She's suffered enough. I have to keep her out –

"Doctor Jans?" Betty's voice booms through the audiogrid. "Time's up."

I depress the speaker button. "Thank you," I say. To Nikki I add, "See you tomorrow, hopefully with good news from the Committee."

We rise together. She wants a hug. I kiss her and cradle her in my arms. "That feels good," she says.

We stand silently for a few moments, just holding each other. Listening to her breathing, I'm reminded of the purring of cats. I don't know if the analogy is valid, but I've seen her respond sexually to both positive and negative stimuli; to me, yes, but also to the terrible memory of her brother. And so I have a dilemma. When I'm with her, when we're touching and sharing our bodies, I will always wonder: am I giving her pleasure, or causing her pain?

I lean on my balcony and look out on the twinkling lights of the city. It's a clear night; this high up, I have a spectacular view of the stars. Tomorrow, hopefully, I'll be standing here with Nikki. Although the Committee still hasn't given me its decision, it did send a summons earlier this evening directing me to meet with one of its representatives at my office building first thing in the morning. The wording of the summons is absolutely neutral, so I can't even guess which way the Committee has chosen.

A cold breeze blows over the city. The season is changing, the nights becoming chilly. I leave the balcony and go to my bedroom to lie down. My heart is pounding. It's frightening to think how desperately I want to be with Nikki, yet I'm powerless to do anything but wait.

Exhausted but unable to sleep, I switch on the radio. The news from the war is good. Not all of the Denaician ships were destroyed at Io. As I suspected, one had gotten close to Earth. Alone and battered, its fuel cells leaking, it made a suicide run over Paris. The pilot apparently meant to smash into a populated area, taking as many humans with him as possible. He never made it through the stratosphere. Earth defenses spotted him and obliterated his ship in an orgy of light and fire. There wasn't a single human casualty.

The entire episode was broadcast live, in glorious color, in parts of Europe. It's undoubtedly been replayed thousands of times since throughout the world. I'm glad I don't have my vidscreen.

The war isn't over, but it's once more

tucked safely away in a distant star system. We can again afford to be aloof and detached, reducing its ugly reality to mild abstraction, just some interesting holoshots on the evening news. The fighting may eventually spread to Earth, but until it actually touches us, we, being who we are, will simply refuse to worry about it.

I'm disgusted by the selfishness and ignorance of my own people – but I'm also relieved to have the Charon incident behind us. There's a sense of security now, surely a false one, but comforting nonetheless. I'm more at ease about the war than I've been in months. I close my eyes and know that sleep, at last, will come.

In the morning I hurry through the necessary ablutions and take a cab to work, where I'm greeted by the Committee's representative, the same woman I'd

system, but then there's the war effort, and rationing...

The woman steps aside and commands me to watch.

A beam of light flashes over my head and onto the screen. The images it carries are two-dimensional and lack the high definition of my holovids, but they're powerful and damning. The vid begins in Nikki's room at the facility; she and I are the actors. I view the scene in horror, a man witnessing his own execution. Nikki brings my fingertips to her lips but doesn't kiss them. She places my hand on her chest. "It's okay," she says. I respond by caressing her breasts. This alone is enough to destroy my career. But then the vid cuts to another scene, same setting, same participants, different day. Nikki is unbuttoning her blouse.

"That's enough!" I scream, and then, more softly, "Turn it off."

The pressure of the war is a convenient excuse, but what I did, I did willingly. I knew there'd be a price. There always is

spoken to on the monitor a few days ago. She indicates I should take a seat in the conference room. "Don't say a word until I'm finished," she says. Her appearance is severe, her attitude harsh. We're alone in the room itself, but I notice technicians in the projection booth at the back. She remains standing while I sit, hunching over the podium as if about to deliver an address to foreign dignitaries. "The Committee," she says, "has denied your request that Nikki Teorson be released into your custody."

I open my mouth to protest but she cuts me off. "This kind of procedure is approved occasionally when both counselor and prisoner are of the same sex, rarely when they are of different sexes, and certainly never in circumstances like yours."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The woman can barely contain her revulsion. "What it means, Doctor Jans, is that the Committee knows about your relationship with Teorson."

"What?"

"You have been having sexual contact with a patient under your care. This is a violation of every code of ethics in your profession. It's also, I might add, against the law."

"This is ridiculous!"

"Is it?" She waves to the projection booth. The lights dim and the wall screen slides down behind her. It's an antiquated

The woman motions to the booth again and the screen goes blank. The lights come up. My head is spinning, and I'm afraid I might vomit.

I didn't realize that facility was equipped for videoing; it's for nonviolent offenders, so there's no need... From the angle of the images, the camera must have been hidden in one of the audiogrids. I feel the numbness returning, a fatalistic acceptance of the end.

"How did you know?" I say.

"You were seen in a speakeasy. We do not appreciate our people frequenting those places and so we take notice when one does. Your record until now has been exemplary, but we considered your behavior to be a warning sign, a previously unseen character deficiency that must be watched. You had never requested personal custody of a prisoner before and – well, with your known marital difficulties, it wasn't too difficult to know where to look. Naturally, we learned of the flat you leased before you'd even left the real estate office, although you didn't bother to register your change of address with us until the next day. The decision to video your sessions was made then."

"I've given my entire professional life to the Committee. I deserve better treatment."

"I'd say, Doctor, you got precisely what you deserved."

I massage my temples. "So what happens now?"

The woman allows herself a small smile. "We expect your immediate resignation, of course. Your counselor's license will be revoked. Charges against you are being considered, although the Committee would prefer to avoid such negative publicity. Still, we *will* arrest you if we have to. You could go to prison, or you could remain a free man. The choice is yours."

"Ah. And what do I have to do?"

"Nikki Teorson has already been sentenced. The full ten years, of course. You, personally, will deliver her into the warden's hands at the women's state prison."

I'm stunned, angry, desolate. This is outrageous... "What's the *point*?"

"You forced our hand, Doctor," the woman says.

"But the maximum? Nikki shouldn't

of the war is a convenient excuse, but what I did, I did willingly. I knew there'd be a price. There always is. Nikki will serve her time and I'll serve mine. Hers is ten years in prison, mine a conscience which lasts for life.

I can't say whose punishment is harsher.

She sits beside me in the police wagon, shackled, silent, distant. I haven't told her my role in what's happening to her, but surely she has guessed. She's not angry. To her, this is just another betrayal disguised as love. She expects it. I don't know what I expected of her, or myself. Perhaps I thought I'd have more courage.

I could have faced the Committee's wrath by refusing its demand, but that wouldn't have helped anybody – and I would never have seen Nikki again. The Committee was so certain what my choice would be that they allowed me to go to my flat, unguarded (but not unwatched), to

senseless farce. All I have to do is remind him –

No. He knows who his passengers are but has not so much as glanced back at us. His silence is his answer. I can't blame him; he was in the speakeasy with me and is also in a precarious position. Perhaps it's his punishment to deliver me so I can deliver Nikki...

Wheels thud softly on pavement; and with that we have come to an end, Nikki and me. I tell myself it's for the best. I have no home, no job. My reputation in my field is ruined. If we ran now we would live as fugitives until we were caught, as we eventually must be. She's going to prison anyway. What purpose would be served by my joining her?

Ah, Nikki. I hug her to my chest. "I love you," I say. "I want you to know that."

She twists her gaze toward me. For the first time tonight she speaks; for the last

do ten minutes, let alone ten years. It will devastate her. What about my recommendation?"

The woman looks down her nose at me. "Doctor Jans, please."

"You *know* what she's been through! If that isn't mitigating circumstances, then our system is a sham!"

"We have only her word for the abuse. There are no police reports, no relevant medical reports, no complaints from family or neighbors, nothing. And her late brother's record was spotless. I believe you've been duped, doctor."

"That's a lie! Nikki Teorson is a sweet, talented, *damaged* woman –"

"We know exactly what kind of woman she is, Doctor. She demonstrated that all too well when she had sex with that... creature."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Why did you do it?"

"Is it wrong to fall in love?"

"No," the woman says icily, "it's wrong to break the law."

It's unfortunate, but many people measure their lives in terms of their losses. I'm no different. Karen, my home, my *things*, my career, everything I once thought I needed. All gone over a flare of middle-age passion. I have only myself to blame. The pressure

rest and freshen up; so certain that when I arrived by cab at the halfway house the police wagon was already waiting for me. For us.

Betty placed the restraints on Nikki's hands and feet. I couldn't do it. Nikki was passive throughout, content to do as she was told, to go where she was led.

"I'm sorry," I say as I guide her into the back seat of the wagon. These are the only words I have to give her.

She simply shrugs. She hasn't spoken, not a word.

I look out barred windows at the lights of the city. It's a different view than from my balcony, a colder view. A light rain is falling. We're flying relatively low; no need for altitude on such a short trip. Once we touch down Nikki will be out of my life. The Committee won't allow us any contact, even written. So few minutes left together, yet we have nothing to say.

I see our destination, an octagonal building just to the south. The wagon begins its descent. Nikki stares straight ahead with empty, unblinking eyes. She appears to be focused on the acrylic partition that separates us from the control compartment. For the first time I notice that our pilot is Clarence. Remembering his offer, I experience a brief rush of hope. It's not too late, I could still stop this

time, I hear her voice. "It isn't enough, Patrick."

Nikki is mistaken. Love is too much. It has destroyed my power to redeem, to heal, to *see*. My goal has always been to make a difference in the lives of my patients. I wanted to help Nikki conquer her past, and had I remained simply her counselor I might have been able to do that. But I let myself get too close, I confused my own needs with hers. Nothing is clear from this distance. To function I need to step back and observe things from the proper angle.

The door opens. Clarence assists Nikki out of the wagon. He looks weathered, beaten. "I'll take her from here, Doc," he says. It's a small kindness, a gesture, perhaps, of apology.

I watch them walk away. Christ, but we *are* fodder, all of us, we're fodder for the war and for the system and for our own intemperate passions.

Rain taps on acrylic windows. The engine's gentle vibrations tremble in the craft's metal frame. I lean forward, touch my forehead to the back of Clarence's empty seat.

Perspective, Doctor Jans, perspective. □

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For JLJ. May she find peace.



SPHERES

story Suzanne Palmer  Richard Marchand image

Ginder's sphere ploded while I was sitting to meal, sending junk fly all over Underside. Tinked on my own hull, did, but no pits or scratches lucky me. Darea, who hangs above Ginder, had hull shrapnel wicked. Looks to have feggod her stabilizers no end too.

He was a good guy, Ginder was. Once we'd got out and tied off the loose ends, we all felt hurty bad scavenging parts of his which survived the burn. Spheres is mostly junkmen, junktown – others' troubles is business, but not like we like it.

When twas all cleaned in, though, I had me a quiet pause, remembering. Myself and Ginder went back some time, living next-and-next from nearly the start of Sphere. Underside grew round us, did, and some spins it felt like ours by rights. We used to talk of taking over, tossing out the weedies and the skunks and the cruft-eaters, reclaiming the lines for the good folk. Never did, though; spheres are too tight to start pulling on other people's tethers.

Word came down the tube there was a boxmeet, so when the dial was up I tuned to. Elbor was first head-on-the-box, saying we'd lost Ginder for those who didn't know yet. Not enough left of his sphere to say what went tank-up on him.

"Irvil?" Elbor asked, turning the talk to me. "You got anything to add?"

"Bits were blackened," I said, "those I found. Whatever ploded was inside Ginder's

sphere, otherwise be no burns. With all Ginder's junk, could abin anything."

"Thanks, Irvil." Elbor frowned, looked down at his hands for a long moment afore getting face-on again. "That's it, everyone. If anyone hears new, give me a knock-knock righty off."

Boxmeet over, I sat back in my fufchair and surfed for the what-now. Klecot was passing by soon and another team of shmancy Upside scientists were jaunting over to hunt for walkie-talkies again. Don't think they'll find any this time either, but they'll get great face-on exploring the deep mud like serious boys and girls. Upside has more beans than sense, sure that. More freedom here hanging off the bottom, I always say.

The remains of meal were still on the table when Elbor came by insel, rapped the lock to be cycled in. Inside, he put his bottle and spider-clip on my table, ran one hand through his dark-brown hair, struggled for words.

"Tis it?" I asked. Elbor goes back almost as long with me as Ginder.

"Came to say Ginder's gone," he said. "Leaves a space. Chelou wants to move up, be next-and-next to you now, old man. Said so right after the boxmeet. First claim."

"Chelou?" I said. I'd seen the cudder once or five, some Earthwiper with a high-me way of talking, made me twitchy nervous and then so. "Chelou's not good enough for

Underside, that one. Should abin him and not Ginder that ploded. Tell him no run."

"Can't do," Elbor said. "He can pay for the space. No one else got stash up front. Darea don't like it neither, but we need the beans or Upside's gonna start metering us for air."

I had my own o2-gen, but most in Underside don't. "I see your light," I said, "but don't feggod like it. Chelou's a jerkup, zero? If you're already sold-off on him, why ask me?"

"Ginder named you for his hand-me-down," Elbor said. "So if you want, his space is yours to take or give. Bad news, you too get his bean hole. If you give the space to Chelou for his pay-out, Ginder's bean hole gets filled, rest split half you half Underside. Good deal?"

"Good deal if twasn't Chelou. Let me think it around my head a bit."

Elbor nodded. "Got a spin or two," he said. "I'm not smiling for him, so if you got a way around things that's run with me."

I nodded. He put back on his gear and saw himself out the lock.

Making myself a fresh tube of tea, I wrapped myself in my comfer and put my feet up. Knees abin bothering me late and I'm trying not to move round as much as used to. I'd took down some novels to my datapad, but right then I didn't feel like watching them. Surprised myself, found tears in my eyes. I was gonna be missing Ginder for a long while. Spheres



just shouldn't plode, not like that. Ginder was a galaxy-class pain, maybe, but always mindful with his junk.

Tea'd gone flat by the time I'd done with my thinking. Sun was full-face as always, coming hot-yellow in my big window. Nobody got sunside xglass cept me, mostly cause the rads, but also there's nothing to see that you could look at anyway. I got my window spesh, after I pulled a lode out of a low-prob rock no one else blinked at and got super bonuses for my luck. I weren't keen on sunlight for me, not back by, but I needed it bright-up for my begonias – only good things to ever come out of dirt that weren't for eating. Truth in the why I set here, front center on the very outside of Underside, all the way back when Spheres was just being built and twas all talk-talk bout the fancy homes up top. Now there's a whole big crowd of us down here, dangling from the bottom towards the sun like beads on a string.

Underside's rough-living no doubt, but home. There's real trade Upside, with its big dome and filter-foils echoing the sun down from below, but down here in sun direct the bean's not easy come by. Sometimes folks go out for salvage, come back and horde or handout. I done six trips in a mining ship when I was young, crapping rocks around from point-a to point-b, and a few short-stint jobs every year or two since. Got beans enough now to live off for a long time. Ginder done some big package dropped-cargo fetches and always said that made him king of his sphere for life, if not much else. Guess it was running out and him not giving us the know; wouldna been like Ginder to talk up beans probs, even to friends.

Ginder.

I tossed the tea, found my bottle and suit, checked the rummage for my goggles and tools. My eyes weren't so good any more, couldn't take the outside glare without getting hurt.

My sphere was tethered one to four, three now without Ginder's line: Darea, Sabol, and Lou and Lei. Plus the crosspoint, long tethers to the food hut, the meetsphere, and gamespace. If I made the run with Chelou for the beans, he'd come outward and take the tether what was Ginder's. He'd be next-and-next and I'd have to let him in if he asked, be hospitable, share my comestibles. Tether-neighbor obligation, all that.

Checked how I was reflecting on the way out, made second-time sure I got everything fastened right. Looking older, I noticed; white hair sticking out every direction like a bad gravity thing til I got my bottle on, but then twas always worse

when I took it off again. Surly hair, that's what I got for me. I'd had the beard now for twenty, still wasn't sure I liked it. And skinny! When did I go all bones, then?

Nothing for doing bout time, though. We broke every other law, light-speed and gravity and probley Darwin too, but not this last – Time goes one way and that's that, static.

Went out my lock, one-door two-door, stood on my lander and clipped my spider to Darea's tether. Sun was behind me, lighting up the whole fepping place. Must be counting towards a thousand spheres here now, all different sizes, all part of the Big Tangle.

Glints in the dark around me, small bits of Ginder's sphere catching the light. I wondered what did it, what could have popped him like that. Behind the strange empty space I could see the outline of Chelou's sphere, bigger than mine, bigger

I remembered when now. Chelou came into the local, tethered above Ginder, while I was off with the last tour half a year ago. Couldn't think the details, how he got to that space. "Where did Yanie go?"

"Yanie's sphere ploded too," Darea said. "Sad thing."

"Oh? That didn't make my ears."

"You was off rock-crapping."

"Was huh." I took another tisket. "So how long was Chelou next-and-next with Yanie?"

"Only a few spins round. Lei's parentkin lived there before. Mum went sun-crazy, Dad popped her and self both. Real mess."

"Yanie, and afore that Lei's kin," I said. "I think I see lines tween the dots here."

Darea looked at me fast, eyes big. "You don't think – ?"

"Not saying sure," I said. "But maybe Chelou's trying to make outside on the quick. No whys, but there tis. Lei's kin, Yanie, Ginder, all a one row."

Must be counting towards a thousand spheres here now, all different sizes, all part of the Big Tangle

than most. No, sure I don't like him. I wondered what Ginder's bean hole was, if I could take it by myself. Or share filling it and move someone else up, like Elbor. *Maybe there's room for dealing*, I thought.

Slid along the tether, the movement second nature. Was most way across when Darea came out, stood on her lander watching me, no help though.

"Crazy old man," she said when I was close enough to see her face, grabbed me when I was close enough to grab. I grabbed back, we held on for a few until it got blush and we let go.

"He was my friend," I said.

"I know," Darea said, and invited me in.

Once we got our bottles shed, she cleared some clutter so I could sit, offered me some tiskets she'd made fresh. I took one, told her bout Chelou and the space.

"I don't like him," she said. "Don't know where he come from, but he talks everyone low, specially those born offdirt."

I'd met two-here two-there Earthborn when I was out on my rock-crapping tours. "It's their thing," I said. "Talking themselves better makes them be better, think that's the win."

"Lousy play, if," Darea said.

"So I know," I agreed. "How many you give him ear-time?"

"Once or two. I tried to be good with the next-and-next biz when he moved up last time, but he just wanted into my bunk."

Darea stood up, knocking the plate of tiskets every way round. "Next is you!" she cried. "You're the end of that line, Irvil! He'll plode you!"

"Not going," I assured her, sliding my goggles back down over my face as I stood, picking up my spider and my bottle. "Came across to put eyes on your stabilizers. I should get out there afore I get tired."

"Oh, Irvil!" Darea was shaking, woeing tears all down. "If you're a goner, I'll have no one!"

Darea and me used to make the happy, back when we were young and not too tired to be bothered with it anymore. Think she did with Ginder too, but that's no hurt on me. We were next-and-next, after all of it. Nobody owns nobody here.

"Came for the fix for you," I repeated. "Don't get fretty bout Chelou. I've been here too long to be outbrained by the likes of he."

"You're surely the smart one of all Underside," Darea said, "and smarter than him by threes. But you're old. Watch your back for Shadow."

I grinned. "No Shadow on me, you know that."

Once I had my bottle back on I went out the lock, down the handholds to the beneath of Darea's sphere. Big hunka metal jammed in the secondary unit, but the first still chugging free. Not a problem unless she lost more tethers.

I pried out the metal, unbolted the unit for

take-home. Clipped to the tether, I spidered my way back across to my own sphere, cycled in, and unbottled. Tired work getting around, always cold after being out; I wanted hot supp and a sleep, just long enough to rest my head and my heart from today.

I slid my window blinds low, cutting the light to thirtycent, gave my dirt-pots the touch test. *Emeiensis* was bout to flower, *listada* was dry again; gave it a quick beaker and told it not to be so thirsty.

Muttering through my plants, my earlier gut-warnings seemed wobbly for real. Things happened Underside, things broke. Just cause Chelou was taking vantage of others' crum luck didn't make him a cause of any. And just cause I didn't like him didn't make him bad. I knew more than most the sort of potty junk that Ginder was always bringing in; something was bound to go deep on him some day, even being careful.

Might be the right thing to go give ear and

"Yeh," I said. "For the plants, you zero." He nodded, looking skeptical. "I see."

"Yeh." When he didn't say more, I added, "Begonias. I have them shipped special from Earth."

"Ah," he said, though he didn't look like he'd eared a word I said. "I am sorry to bother you. I happened to run into Elbor again a short while ago and he said you were mulling over my offer for the recently vacant berthing space."

Recently vacant berthing space. He talked like an Earthborn: too many words, none of them speaking the obvious: Ginder's space.

"Tis so," I said. "Nothing bout you, just Ginder and me went back long ways."

"Elbor said you were two of the original settlers."

"Yeh, some of them," I said. Didn't really want to talk bout Ginder, but I spose I brought it up. "Best friend, you know."

"I'm truly sorry to intrude on your grief,"

rolls out that twas a new week; if I didn't get to store, was gonna be bottomed on food real soon. So supplies trip first then, afore Darea's. Packed up my haulbag, got back into my gear and cycled out.

From my landing, I could put eyes on Chelou still spidering the long way back to his sphere. I used the magzoom on my goggles, got a good see-all of his place. Some guy waiting on his landing, not someone I knew. Huh. Thought I knew everybody, but spose Chelou has friends from up the Tangle, from afore he come moving sunward toward us.

Kept eyes on Chelou till he landed, watched how the guy deferred to him, helped him through the door. Another Earthborn, I'd swear it, and not Spheres at all. Maybe he's come to put eyes on Klecot when it passes, another damn dirt-footed scientist trying to zero why Klecot keeps having new stuff whenever it comes near, but

lip to Chelou bout the move, get a honest feel for the man, new start and all. I been late cranky – maybe twas just age, maybe twas that Underside not still like when I came here. Crowded now, too many people to know each, problems reaching my ears bout fighting under colors, skunk getting in here and there in little places, like we was a big city somewhere could afford a drug problem.

"Irvil," I said to me, "man's not your problem. You like your quiet, and if the man can respect that then there's no reason he can't be a good next-and-next. Even if you don't nearly match orbits on things."

Resolved to be all bout reason, I spent meal mucking with Darea's stabilizer til I dozed off in my fufchair.

Woke up to the blinds still low. Back stiff, stalked across my sphere like I was glass, let in the Sun. Checked the begonias, found a dried leaf in the empty space behind the *hydrocotylifolia*, crumbled it up tween my fingers to dust. Was just thinking bout getting back to the stabilizer when my chime rang.

Eyed out, saw a tall, thick figure in a gold-tinted bottle on my landing. Chelou. Swallowed my thoughts, let him in.

He unbottled, taking a look around my sphere without seeming down on it. "Bright in here," he said, squinting. "Nice window; I didn't know anyone in Underside had one, they're so expensive. Custom job?"

he said. "Clearly an awkward time. I just... well, I very much want to move, and I'm hoping you'll accept me as a neighbor. And, of course, this far at the end of the web it's dangerous to leave a position empty."

He was right, too, but him saying so made me feel pushed. "I'm still thinking," I said.

Chelou frowned. "I know life can be tough down here, and it's hard to lose a friend in such a senseless way. But I'm very interested in that space, and I'm not against helping out my neighbors when they help me. I'm not only willing to buy out Ginder's space and debt from you, I'd be happy to kick in a little extra – enough so you could find yourself a little place topside, even, if you chose."

"Why?"

"Why shouldn't I help out my neighbors, if I can? I'm just trying to be generous."

"Nothing against you, but I'm not needing your beans and I'm not gonna make my thinking fast. Me and Darea and the others direct to it will decide together whod be best to take Ginder's space. Maybe it's you, maybe no. Can't say yet."

Chelou frowned. "It's your choice, and I respect that," he said. "I do hope you'll keep me in mind, though. I'm sure wed get along very well together."

I thanked him, helped him with his fancy bottle and out the doors. Dropped him from my thoughts as I finished the stabilizer, thought about making the spider to Darea's sphere right away when my brain

no sign of anyone living there. S'like ghosts come when we're out of sight and rearrange the place, make big cubes out of rock piles on the nightside and then go hidey.

What-hey, Chelou's biz, not mine. Clipped my spider on to the central line, let it carry me and I just hung on moving out of my local into the next above. Oris was out on her landing, waved me hello as I went past. She was early to Underside too, but spheres grew tween us so we never really got friendly.

Up the tether, headed towards the underside of Upside, sun on my back. Spheres slowly passing by me, like I was moving up tween giant molecules. Tangle was mostly one-to-four tethers, more as Underside got denser, and the long runs like the one I was on for going tween. Saw a few folk spidering this way and that. On a parallel I eyed a guy who was just hung on to his spider hand-one, not moving cept to twitch and bash at his own bottled face with hand-two. *Skunk*. As I saw, he let go and drifted, all thrash and bend and flail.

Nothing to do from here, can't get there in any good time. Skunk-heads can hurt you, too. I sighed, turned away. Tether catch-all ahead. One more line to the center anchor and I could give word bout the skunk, get someone out there to rescue him afore he drifts out of Underside altogether.

Grabbed the crossover bar, unclipped my spider from my line and onto the next,

set it moving again. Not long then I'm at the anchor, setting myself down on the big platform.

"You late, Irvil," Tiggam said when I got inside the store doors.

"Yeh, lots to be done first," I said.

Checked my cubby. Three boxes, all there. Carried it up to the counter.

"Sorry bout Ginder," Tiggam says as he tabs me up. "He was good folk, always had Underside in his heart. Wouldn't give it up, even with all that beans stuck in his face, impressed me some!"

"Beans?" I asked.

"Yeh. Ginder was up here restocking two days afore, said he'd got big offer to sell his sphere. For that much I'da done it, I told him, but he laughed and said no decent place in the KnownWorlds'd take his sorry carcass no matter the beans he had."

"Probley true," I said. "Did he name the guy with the beans?"

"No, only said fancy Earther type now playing local. That's fifty-two and four-nine beans," Tiggam said, putting a wrap round the boxes so I could carry them one-hand-all.

Slid my card through the beanticker, watched it green, picked up my boxes.

"Thanks, Tiggam," I said. "Oh, yeh! Some feffing skunk-head fell off his spider, down near the last crisscross."

"Thanks, will send word to rescue," Tiggam said. "More skunk round every day, seems like. No sense in it at all."

"No, tisn't. Gotta go."

"Next week?"

"Next!" I called. "Same buys."

Recharged my bottle afore I took my spider back down, thinking bout Tiggam's words and not smiling at my thoughts. Twas Chelou tried to buy out Ginder's space, that's as plain as the sun. Ginder nod it, now Ginder's dead and left a path of accidents leading right skip back to Chelou.

Darea was right bout I'm being next. Tried to think on what I'd said to the man, and figured twas more like than not that he figured I was gonna say no too, just like Ginder done.

Didn't even look round til I was nearly back at my house, passing by Chelou's sphere and the big gap where Ginder used to sit. Shook my thoughts out of my head, looked up, saw Chelou and his friend on their landing. Both waved, all friendly-like, and that made me chill from toe to toe.

Afore I was out of sight, I saw Chelou go inside. The man lingered, eyes on me, afore following him in.

Halfway cross the last empty I spotted the

package on my lander, familiar four-square logo with the leaf across it stamped into the metal. *Ah!* I thought. *My misionaria!* Couple days late, but not bad off for travellin all the way from Earth. I wasn't even on the landing yet and I was already thinkin through the steps of getting it vivved again, when I swear felt the Shadow at my back.

I offed my spider. Took out one of my supply boxes, pulled it open, took out a packjar and read the label: apple butter. Put it back, took out a different one: canned noodle. That, I could live without.

I backed up to the nearest crisscross, unclipped myself and pushed, making the slow drift over to the line tween my sphere and Darea's. Grabbed it first grab, clipped back on. Steady braced, sent the canned noodle slowly spinning the empty tween me and my sphere. I got lots of throwing practice from the rock-crapping, and I eyed the can straight at the edge of the

"Darea! Where in Shadow'd you get that?"

"Granddad's, from the war," she said.

"Never thought I'd have a use for it, ugly hurty thing. Going to now, though, first time ever. No one kills my men, Irvil. Not some stinking dirtsider lowlife, and not no one else. Time this ended!"

"Darea," I said, step step tween her and the door, but shaky nervous. Bad knife, that. "We'll get him, okay? I just need some thinking, first."

She stood there, froze in the middle of her living room in her apron and slippers with the deadly knife in her hand, and I was betting she could take Chelou out right then. At last, she let out a small cry, set the knife down on the table, and fell into a chair.

"Stay here," I said. "Put some tea in. I'm going out in the lock to eye what's doing."

For safe, took the knife with me. Put my bottle back on, closed the inside door and looked out the window. People were

She stood there, froze in the middle of her living room in her apron and slippers with the deadly knife in her hand

landing right next to the box afore I turned my head away.

Flash lit me from behind, lucky me with my goggles even facing away. Bits hit my back, hard, and I heard my suit hissing and sealing. Nasty chill-bruise there, later.

The tether went free. The fegger had ploded my home. *My begonias!*

Not much time, even angry; Chelou'd look, sure, soon as first chance. I offed my bottle lamp and spidered double-time to Darea's sphere, got there just as she was opening her door.

I waved her in with my hand, and nearly pushed her back in the door with me.

"Home ploded," I said, both of us still tween the doors. "You gotta go look, be all hurty and weep, so Chelou don't think I'm hidey here. Then come back in, zero?"

She nodded, face full of angry, went back out for a few moments, made a show of falling to her knees on the landing. Good. Could see Lei out now too, heard the weep-talk on the comms.

Then Darea was back inside, both of us through the second door and in. She got her bottle off afore me, grabbed me hard. "Irvil!" she cried. "What happened?"

"Chelou," I said. "Thinks he got me now."

Suit still half-on, she stomped to her tea cabinet, threw it open, tossed stuff out til she came up with a small, black-handled object. A Veirakan energy-blade, of all the things that don't zero.

still out on their landings, Chelou already talking face-to with Elbor, shrugging and shaking his head. Everyone was looking at the cloud of bits that was once my home, spreading outwards and away. Had another sharp pain in my heart thinking bout my plants, and almost went out the lock with Darea's knife to finish things right there.

Went inside, hard as can-be to do. Darea and I had tea, some cold tiskets, neither of us saying nothing at all, lost in our own minds.

Elbor came for face-talk with Darea. She wasn't green with the idea, but I stayed hid so Elbor didn't put eyes on me. I'd given Darea as my hand-me-down, so she got Ginder's and mine stuff both.

"Up to you," he told her. "Chelou wants to move out all the way, take Irvil's spot. Bad fortune there, best none of us take it either, I think."

She said yes, cause I made her give word afore Elbor got here. Elbor's eyes were red, and he looked more hurty and tired than ever I remember seeing. Lou and Lei stopped later, bringing a basket of hot crusties and jam, stayed with Darea for a little while. Felt bad for stayin' hid, but needed doing. Time to make peace later.

Chelou had his sphere moved right away. Got to the edge like he wanted, I spose. Darea wouldn't go out, fraid if she came face-to with Chelou she'd say or do something she shouldn't. So she stayed by the box, watching

READERS' POLL

The Interzone Readers' Poll is here again and once again we're asking readers to let us know what they enjoyed (and what they didn't) over the last year or so. In an attempt to get the poll back on a regular annual schedule, we're asking you to pick your most and least favourite stories from seven issues of *Interzone*: issues 201 to 207 inclusive. To jog your memory, a full list of the eligible stories is below.

Also, to recognise the increased importance of original artwork in *Interzone*, we'd like you to vote for your favourite piece of art from the same issues – either cover art or story illustrations.

As always, we're as keen to hear your opinions of the magazine over the last year as we are to get your votes, so don't be shy in letting us know what you think – and we may publish the most interesting comments.

Readers can vote by post, email or on the discussion forum.

The Rules

You may vote on any story or piece of artwork published in issues 201 to 207 inclusive – eligible stories are set out below

Tell us which stories you enjoyed, and which you didn't

You may vote for as many stories as you wish

We welcome comments as well as votes, but somewhere in your communication please include a clear list of the stories you are voting for

To vote by post: Martin McGrath, 48 Spooners Drive, Park Street, St Albans, Herts AL2 2HL

To vote by email: interzonepoll@ntlworld.com

To vote online: www.ttawpress.com/discus (*Interzone* topic)

The results will be published in *Interzone* issue 209, so please make sure your votes are in before 31 January 2007

2+2=5 (205)
Rudy Rucker & Terry Bisson
illustrated by Rudy Rucker

A Brief History of the Dream Library (204)
Elizabeth Hopkinson

After the Party (201, 202, 203)
Richard Calder
illustrated by David Seneca

Among the Living (203)
Karen D. Fishler
illustrated by Chris Nurse

Beehive (202)
cover art by Dan Dos Santos

Blue Glass Pebbles (205)
Steven Mills
illustrated by Pamelina H

Boy Twelve (201)
Jessica Reisman
illustrated by Stefan Olsen

Clocks (207)
Daniel Kayser

Distro (206)
Tim Akers
illustrated by David Gentry

Droid (206)
cover art by Fahrija Velic

Exiles (203)
cover art by Mark Garlick

Frankie on Zanzibar (207)
David Mace
illustrated by Jesse Speak

Harsh Oases (201)
Paul Di Filippo
illustrated by Vincent Chong

In the River (205)
Justin Stanchfield
illustrated by Richard Marchand

Karel's Prayer (206)
Chris Beckett
illustrated by Rik Rawling

Leaving the Harbour (201)
cover art by Fahrija Velic

Longing for Langalana (204)
Mecurio D. Rivera
illustrated by Stefan Olsen

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Martin J. Gidron
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Planet of Peril (205)
cover art by Jim Burns

Sententia (207)
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Sheila (201)
Lauren McLaughlin
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Spheres (207)
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Stonework (207)
Wendy Waring
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Summer's End (204)
Jamie Baras
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Sundowner Sheila (202)
F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre
illustrated by Douglas Sirois

Ten With a Flag (203)
Joseph Paul Haines
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The American Dead (203)
Jay Lake
illustrated by Rik Rawling

The Beekeeper (206)
Jamie Baras
illustrated by Stefan Olsen

The Furthest Schorr: 32 Fugues Based on the Paintings of Todd Schorr (203)
Paul Di Fillipo

The Last Reef (202)
Gareth Lyn Powell
illustrated by Vincent Chong

The Macrobe Conservation Project (202)
Carlos Hernandez
illustrated by SMS

The Measure of Eternity (205)
Sean McMullen
illustrated by Bruce Richardson

The Nature of the Beast (206)
Jae Brim
illustrated by David Gentry

The New Chinese Wives (206)
Will McIntosh
illustrated by Jesse Speak

The Purring of Cats (207)
Dave Hoing
illustrated by Kenn Brown

The Rising Tide (204)
C.A.L.
illustrated by Ales Horak

The Ship (206)
Robert Davies

The Song (204)
Tim Akers
illustrated by Richard Marchand

The Unsolvable Deathtrap (202)
Jack Mangan
illustrated by Rik Rawling

This Happens (205)
David Mace
illustrated by Chris Nurse

Untitled (204)
cover art by John Picacio

Wane (203)
Elizabeth Bear
illustrated by Ian Simmons

Wax (201)
Elizabeth Bear
illustrated by Ian Simmons



Other writers' books say 'You can do it, if only you believe in yourself and follow these simple rules.' This book says 'You might do it, but you should know from the start that there really is, as you have always suspected, an intergalactic conspiracy of space-vampires, Freemasons and commissioning editors dedicated to keeping you in your place.'

If Ford Prefect wrote a writers' book, this is the one he'd write.

At last, a hip writers' book which doesn't insult its readers' intelligence. For the first time, a writers' book written by a writer, which would-be writers won't be embarrassed to be seen reading!

'If bursting into unstoppable fits of convulsive laughter – you know, when your bodily functions are seemingly controlled by some sadistic invisible force – is liable to embarrass you, do not read this book in public' **Tim Lebbon**



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- Issue 208 is out in January 2007: Jetse de Vries talks about sensawunda and we back him up with mind-boggling new stories by British Fantasy Award winner Paul Meloy, Jason Stoddard & others.
- 2007 is Interzone's 25th anniversary year with stories from golden generations old and new, special features celebrating 25 years of science fiction & fantasy, free cover mounts, parties and more!
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the Upside scientists crawling all over Klecot finding nothing again, while I spent days watching Chelou, watching through my goggles, watching dark from the lines, looking at everything he did til Darea would drag me in from the lock and make me eat and get some sleep. I still couldn't zero what he was doing; damn fegging hard to see looking right into the sun, goggles or no.

After a week we was down to crumbs and crap for food and Darea made ready to spider up to the store. "If you buy too much for just you," I said, "they'll know I'm here."

"Gotta have food, Irvil," she said. "If we both starve, then don't matter if you were ploded or not."

She was right, but I didn't like it none. "Just a little longer," I said. "This's gotta end soon, anyway."

I gave her some little kissing, then had a thought. "Buy me a handjet, could you?"

"That's a lot of beans," she said, frowning.

they unloaded tanks from the floater onto the landing. He handed over a cred chit to the pilot, who ran it and flew, same way straight out. Chelou went back inside as his man moved the tanks from the landing into storage underneath. When he'd finished, he also cycled in, then lights off.

Quiet, I jetted a blast behind me, pushed forward towards the sphere. Heart was bumping hard as I got to the landing, waiting for someone to put eyes on me, but my suit and bottle were dark. I hauled myself under the landing, found the storage locked.

Not a got-me. Pulled out my toolkit, shorted the lock. Again, waited to get caught, but no alarm. Big stupid for them; what, do they zero there's no one left to bother it up? Armed in, pulled out a tank. Air?

Why smuggle air? No sense there.

Connected it to my aux bottle hose, took a small, quick suck. Whoa, stars in my head!

Now I knew, two mysteries in one.

I'd need, and spidered down to Chelou's sphere. Quiet there, quiet me, no noise on the landing. I took out the Veirakan energy knife and sliced through the tether from Chelou's sphere to Darea's, and it drifted loose and wriggly away.

Pushed myself up the far side, found the long tether, sliced it to halves. Nice knife. Then I dropped under, braced, and tore both stabilizers out, sent them spinning.

'Bout now, Chelou should be waking up to an alarm. Had to move fast. Was back down the side and grabbing hold of the tether from Chelou to Sabol when Chelou's man cycled out onto the landing, looked around, set eyes on me. I waved, cut the tether, and slipped around the curve.

Hadn't got far. Man came round the side, jumping at me, something in his hand. He moved awkward, like his legs still expected gravity. I spent years in freefall rock-crapping and had my share of fights then too, so I

"I know. Use my beans."

"Oh!" she said. "Forgot I had those. This mean you're finally gonna do something bout Chelou?"

"Think so."

"Okay then." She gave me a fast grab, put her bottle on, and left for the store. I stayed in the lock, as always, til she was back safe.

Woke up in middle sleep that night, couldn't get back out. Darea was warm beside me, off safe in dreams. I slid out of the bed, pulled my thinsuit on, grabbed the handjet and my bottle and went out the lock.

All the local spheres were dark, our agreed-on night-time, so no one around at all. I took my spider and moved down the line, and then used a quick blast from my handjet to move off away from Underside into open space. Most my life in the Tangle, and now here I was out untied and unseen. I thought bout letting go and drifting away, knew Darea would never forgive me.

Tried to put myself not tween Chelou and the sun, but still not have it in my eyes. Took me time and then some, afore my eyes caught a quick flicker from Chelou's landing. I zoomed with my goggles, turning up the nighteyes, and watched as a dark float pulled up to the Earther's sphere from straight near the sun. Blind for us, coming that way to the edge. *Where I'd been afore with my window facing out, I realized, the only one with eyes that way at all.*

Chelou came out, his man with him, and

Skunk was coming in through Chelou, and he wanted the edge so he could bring more and more – enough to destroy Underside. Straight in was Upside's blind spot, and no one in the Tangle looks at the sun.

I unscrewed the tank from my feed and put it back, mind still vile and high. Took the spider back to Darea's, fell through the lock onto the floor and let the stars eat my head.

Musta made loud, cause I woke with Darea there, holding me and crying. "You was hitting yourself, Irvil," she said.

"Chelou's dealing skunk," I said, tongue all fat and weasley in my mouth. "Didn't know, had to see."

"Oh," she said, and just sat there all big eyes at me.

I sat up, shooting sparks through my head. "Gotta stop him, Darea," I said.

"You already gone red on me cuttin' him," she said. "Woulda been easier, done by now and none of this hiding. Can we call Upside, turn him in for the skunk?"

"Upside don't care bout us, cept that we're quiet and no trouble. Come down here for one, they'll clean out us all."

"So you tell me how, and we'll do it."

"Call Elbor," I said. "Have him come over. We've got talking."

Early on the local clock, in Underside's always-day. I put back on my suit and bottle and picked up the other things

waited til he was almost on me and then I twisted, kicked him sharp in the stomach, sent him spinning out. Finished my swing round, grabbed onto the sphere again in one quick move. Took out the handjet, turned off the auto-save, magged it to the sphere's skin. Then I pulled out my toolkit, jammed the trodes into Chelou's comm systems, turned it to slag. No calling for help, no more.

I swung and dropped to the landing, put one hand round the only tether still holding Chelou's sphere to underside, and waited.

Chelou himself cycled out, standing in his doorway, another of his men with him. I watched his mouth move, then frustration, then move again. "Irvil," he said, when he finally found the short-range channel I was on.

"Chelou," I said. "Sorry I didn't die for you."

"As am I," he said. "I wouldn't cut that, if I were you."

"This?" I set the edge of the idling knife up to the tether. "Got a reason for me?"

"I could make you very rich," he said.

"Beans from selling skunk? Don't think I'd like that. Beside which, I already was rich," I said. "I had my friends and I had my begonias and I had Underside, and that was all the rich I wanted. You took it, Chelou, and you can't buy the truth away from that."

"You could have that again. I could be your friend, Irvil."

"Don't think so, no."

"Then you could just die again," he snarled, and pulled a gun out of his suit. "Out here, who would know?"

"Got eyes?" I gestured.

He step-stepped out of his door, turned and looked. All round us, the people of Underside were out on their landings, Elbor right front, arms across himself. Could see the anger from here, I could, and so could Chelou.

"You stupid, stubborn old man," he yelled, and lifted his weapon at my head.

I checked my angle, knew twas bout time. Pushed off, one hand still on the tether, cut it neatly in half as I swung around. It parted, went loose, carrying me with it. Chelou shot, missed, as his men pushed out the lock with their own weapons. I pulled my toolkit remote and pressed the button. The handjet I'd stucked to the back of Chelou's sphere fired overload, pushing the sphere out of line.

The jolt made Chelou's man tumble, off his feet and ending up in space. Chelou reached down, grabbed him, pulled him back onto the landing. The sphere was moving slowly but steadily out, the handjet giving one last burst afore flaming out.

Space, so won't stop moving unless it gets stopped.

Around us, a hundred cheers came over the local.

"This isn't over," Chelou said, "and when I get back – "

"There's no back," I answered. "Nothing going to stop your drift til the Shadow catches you." Chelou's man, panicking, leapt off the landing towards us. He mighta made it but Chelou shot him, and the corpse continued towards us in a halo of air and blood.

"You gods-be-damned – " Chelou started.

I cut him off. "You're an assvalve, Chelou, and Underside don't want you. If you make it to the Sun, wave hello for me."

He spun around, realized what direction he was drifting, and began to scream at me. I popped another button and his local comms shut down too. 'Course, at his drift rate, he'd die of starvation long afore he started warming. I was good with that.

Elbor signalled me. "You bout done yet, Irvil?"

"Done," I said.

I eyed Chelou's sphere, getting smaller and harder to see aginst the sun. The

feelgood of pushing him off was fading into missing my home and my plants, and knowing I was just as lost now as if I had drifted too.

"Irvin," Darea said my name. I turned, and she lifted a box from tween her doors that wasn't there when I'd left.

"What's that?" I asked, but my heart was already thumping at my chest and my eye'd gone all to water, cause I knew.

Dorea looked at the tag, looked an apology to me. "Hemsleyana," she said, "if I said that right. Dunno if tis any good, but I didn't know which was best."

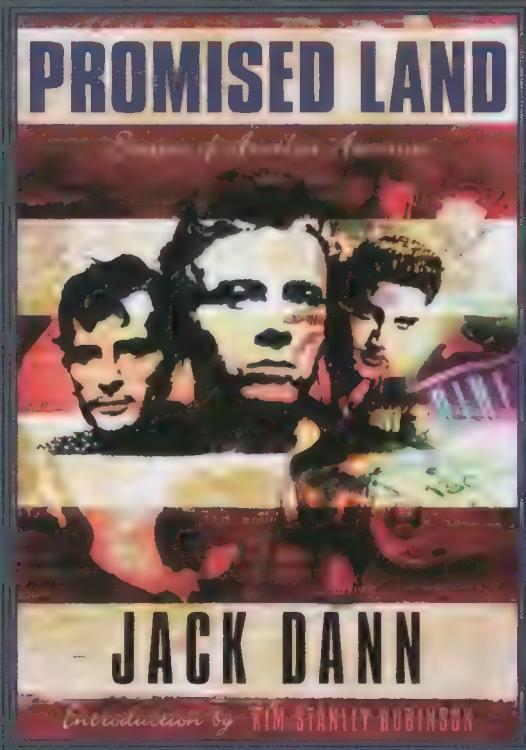
"You're gonna need a new sphere," Elbor said. "Take a while for one though, plus working out getting your beans back. Figure Chelou'sll go to paying up the hole and any extra."

"Irvin can stay with me," Darea said. "Long as he wants, til he gets his new sphere."

So I did, cept I never got my own sphere back. We moved Darea's to the edge, bought a big add-on room with a window from the last of Ginder's beans, and I never left.

Even caught her talking to the begonias when she thought I wasn't round, and that was a fine, smiling thing. □

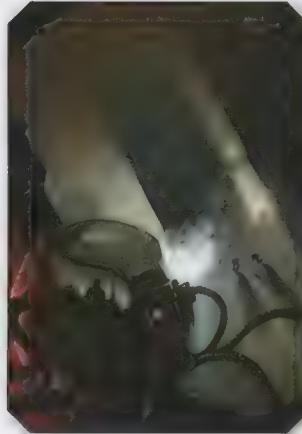
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In *Promised Land*, Jack Dann returns to the alternate America of his acclaimed 2004 novel *The Rebel: An Imagined Life of James Dean*. In that book, Dean, the most promising actor of his time, survived his car crash in 1955, and lived on, making great movies and interacting with some of the foremost personalities of the Fifties and Sixties while drifting towards a strange political destiny in lockstep with Robert Kennedy. Now, *Promised Land* expands on that premise, offering brilliant insights into Dean, the Kennedys, and others, both as they were and as they might have been.

In this volume's dexterously interlinked stories and novellas, we come to understand Marilyn Monroe more vividly than ever before—her inner conflicts, her indecision between lovers and lifestyles, between life and death. We witness the evolution of Elvis Presley from a home-grown Memphis boy to a jaded superstar, the deaths of those closest to him fuelling his alienation from his better nature. We glimpse the paradoxical moral constitution of Bobby Kennedy, crusading idealist yet capable of deep cynicism and infidelity. We come to know the wheedling eloquence of Jack Kerouac, and the bizarre psychology of William Burroughs. And connecting them all, in chains of passionate friendship and enigmatic karmic sympathy, is the figure of Jimmy Dean, who believes his second chance at existence is a trust from God, but who struggles to uncover what exactly that means . . .

Promised Land is a superb meditation on fame, love, and fate, replete with evocative dialogue, rich characterization, and dazzling prose poetry. It is the story collection of the year.



FRANKIE ON ZANZIBAR

story David Mace ■ Jesse Speak image

Urmilla leaned close. She smiled. She had twinkly eyes. "Don't play too long. You do breakfast as if you had the whole day. But today..." The honey disappeared into Urmilla's hand. "Today we have visitors."

Fransi nodded. The tip of her knife scalloped feather-edges in the butter. The yellow scrapings were tacked back on as fluffy textures under the tail.

Urmilla's hand put the orange peel on the plate, then took the plate away. The hand returned for the glass with its dregs of milk. "Finished?"

"Mm."

Away went the glass. "What is it?"

Anyone could see what it was. Urmilla could see. But it was nice of her to ask. "A cola bird."

Urmilla laughed. "Funny colour for a cola bird."

"It's a cola butter bird!"

"Ha! Yes. Oh, but look – the tail's melting." No, it wasn't melting. It was sagging as its semi-solid substance sheared. But it *looked* like it was melting. "It wouldn't if the butter was straight from the fridge. If I put it back in the fridge..."

"I don't think it would like to live in the fridge. Not even a butter cola bird." The bowl with the yoghurt and the single lingering berry left the table. "That would be a very chilly cage."

Fransi's table knife, which served as her

sculpting spatula, was also a fishing scoop. It caught the berry and balanced it stickily on its tip.

"Nice trick," Urmilla said. "But don't stab me, or I'll fry your ears for supper. Now – the butter. Fridge. Back in its cage."

Fransi sucked the berry off the tip of the knife. It crushed between teeth and tongue, a bitter-sweet fruitiness with a slick of yoghurt. She hopped off the chair and headed across the kitchen, watching the cola bird's tail flop to the base of the butter dish and stabilise in an approximate arc. The thing about using butter – all you do is redistribute the material, and that changes what it is. Now it was a fantastic avian-arch bridge over a lily stream in the ornate garden of the Princess of the World...

The fridge was full, as always. In went the cola bird bridge, where it was cold enough to survive. Butter birds need a cold cage. There are other cages, out in the rest of the very warm world. At least the cage that Urmilla owned had klima. You needed klima, stuck here on Zanzibar.

.....

There were two visitors. They sat on the sofa, their feet on the island rug and their backs to the jungle. They weren't very impressed by the jungle. When they first walked in, the woman had watched a capybara patter past through the wet season puddles, but then she'd dismissed the rainforest. The man had merely

glanced. They must have seen plenty of jungle walls in Zanzibar.

You didn't see much real jungle, that was for sure.

Sriram offered chai. They took it, politely, but you could tell they found it too sweet. The cups slowly grew cold on their saucers on the coffee table, next to the paper and pencil put there for Fransi's use. The woman unpacked a pad from her handbag. "You don't mind?"

Sriram shook his head. Urmilla smiled indulgently.

The woman started to write on the pad with the touch pen. "The memory encrypts everything. There's no security risk."

"The encryption," the man said. He pointed at the pad. "It's the best." Then he shifted his eyes to Fransi, and dressed his face in a smile. "Hi. My name's Tobias. I'm from the Utsuku Corporation. We look after you, kind of. Our executive fund supports your lifestyle."

"I know," Fransi said. "I haven't seen you before."

"That's right. I'm new here. And this is Ayness. She's from the Zanzibar Enclave Authority."

Ayness smiled. "I'm quite new here, too."

"So..." Tobias glanced at the pad. "Do you mind if Ayness takes notes?"

Fransi shook her head.

"Fine. My memory isn't that good. Well – not as good as yours, I bet. Okay, Fransiska.



Guess you're wondering why we're here?"

Fransi didn't respond.

"You can call her Fransi," Urmilla said. More indulgence.

Tobias and Ayness exchanged glances. Then they looked at the pro-parents. The concern was already masked, but for a fragment of time it had been there. It wasn't easy to judge whether Urmilla and Sriram had registered the expression. But Fransi had.

"I'm thinking," Tobias said carefully, "is that a good idea? Calling her Fransi, I mean."

"I don't mind," Fransi decided to say, and put the conversation right where she wanted it. "That's my name."

Ayness wrote on the electronic pad.

Tobias put on the smile again. "Okay – Fransi it is. So, the reason we're here. We want to do another progress report. How you like it here, how you're getting along, what you'd like to do over the next few

Urmilla's indulgence was qualified with reluctant patience. She was a pro-parent, always concerned about her charge

months, maybe. I guess you're used to these progress reports by now?"

"This is the fourth this year."

"Four in eleven months." Urmilla's indulgence was qualified with reluctant patience. She was a pro-parent, always concerned about her charge. "Those are a great many reports for a little girl."

"We try to keep it low key. We know it's a strain, potentially unsettling, but with the risk factors – "

"Four in one year," Sriram said. He was interrupting. He was cutting off the allusion to risk factors. "It's not so bad. It was worse before. Reports and tests all the time, believe me."

"Test every day," Fransi said. She closed her eyes. How much chai is still cooling in Tobias's cup? Aha. And in Ayness's cup? Aha. Open your eyes and check. Good. "Want to test my memory?"

"Oh, I guess we can do that, too." Tobias glanced at what was going down on the pad. "You like brain teasers? How about some mental math?"

"Mental math's guile." Fransi pulled one of the sheets of paper across the coffee table. She picked up the pencil. Paper and pencil – old fashioned and expensive, but professional pro-parent educators knew the value of self-expression using real media. The self-expression, though, would have nothing to do with the mental math. "Okay, let's go!"

Urmilla, plump and motherly and a traditional wife, clears the cups of chai, and the glass, and the pencils and paper Fransi used. She starts for the door –

"Those papers," Ayness says. "Could I have those?"

Urmilla hesitates.

Sriram waves his hand. "Analysis on the girl. Let her have the papers."

"Hm." There's no indulgence now. "You may *look* at them. Don't take them away. Security."

"Security? My dear, these people understand the need. I'm sure it's safe – "

"It's okay." Ayness is taking hold of the papers. With her other hand she makes a slight gesture towards Tobias. It's difficult to evaluate. The definition on the cam isn't that good.

"And no pictures," Urmilla says.

"Please?" Then she leaves for the kitchen.

them over the coffee table. Is she writing or is she copying the scribbles? Switch to the opposite cam. No use. The woman's own shoulder is in the way. It doesn't matter, though, if she is reproducing the jumble of doodles. Fransi stayed rigidly right-handed. Nothing ambi, nothing mirror. But she went beyond the envelope that befits a *very bright ten year old*. There are meta-patterns that reveal a more advanced mind.

Switch back to the other cam.

"How well is she learning?" Tobias is looking round. The room is set out in plain décor, but pictures and statuettes enliven all the spaces. They're a clever mix of epochs and styles, though Indian *objets* tend to dominate. Of course, the wall behind him is pure jungle, a vast window of contemporary reality. If, that is, you'll accept the notion that there are any real rainforests left on the planet. The birds and beasts certainly look as though they still exist as they flit or wander past the living room, busy animals going about their own little lives and ignoring the house out of which no one ever comes...

"Oh, she's ahead of all the targets. Brilliant work – obviously. I think, you know, she's going to leave me behind in algebra before much longer. Thank goodness my wife will still be able to keep up."

"But you're keeping on top? The pro-parenting's going okay?"

"Oh, goodness me, yes. We still have a year or so of time – "

Urmilla comes back into the room.

" – before we run out of things. And then, well, this is Zanzibar. It isn't the best enclave, but it has so many corporate representations. So very many. This is a node on the global network. She can continue her education here, she can find a career."

"A *careful* career choice," Urmilla says. She stands by the head of the coffee table. She's inverted the basic convention that the seated persons have social supremacy. It's her house, and she's in charge of it. "That's going to be quite a problem. As is the question of when we start to tell her. What do your people think about it?"

Tobias shrugs. "Not ours to decide. We just report."

"But we have input." Ayness is shuffling Fransi's doodle sheets together. "We'll be back tomorrow for the follow-up."

Tobias nods.

So does Urmilla, speculatively.

Sriram points at the wall behind the guests. "How do you like our jungle, by the way? I know it's just this year's fashion, but Fransi had a lot to do with it. She had great fun designing it. Lots and lots of research,

Ayness is already lifting the pad for the pics. She shrugs. She puts down the pad and glances at Fransi's scribbles.

Tobias is looking at them, too. Then he kind of wrestles his attention away and addressed Sriram. "How good is the security in the house?"

"Oh, very good. We have no domestics. We're careful with our friends. We don't do parties here. One, two, three people at a time. We can always keep an eye on them, we can check the cams afterwards."

Tobias looks up, stares straight into the cam. "What system is it?"

"Castle Home Advanced. Constant watch is always on, it's ID enhanced, and we've installed a Shockwave Rider. You couldn't hack it, believe me."

"And Fransiska – Fransi – has a user ID?"

"Of course. But don't worry. It's under our administration. We've configured it so it looks as though she's got the kind of access you'd expect a very bright ten year old to enjoy, but it's filtered through our parameters. For example, Fransi can't use the system to snoop around the house. If there's anything she wants that it won't allow, she has to ask us. She's very good, though. Hardly ever asks for anything. She's so busy learning, learning, learning. It keeps her happy."

Tobias nods.

Ayness is working on her pad while looking at the sheets of paper. She's spread

you know the kind of thing."

They turn in their seats and look at the jungle.

"I wonder," Urmilla says. "Did you notice?"

There's a pause. Through the other cam, the visitors are looking below it, at the wall. Then Ayness turns away.

Back to the original cam. Ayness is putting her pad and pen in her bag. She hasn't taken any of the papers.

Tobias turns back. "Notice what?"

Urmilla just beams at him. Sriram joins in.

Ayness doesn't. Subtly, she's changed. Her body language has shed some of its disguise. She isn't anyone's secretary. She's someone's boss. "The capybara."

The pro-parents nod eagerly.

"The what?"

"The capybara. The big rodent." Ayness stands up. Tobias joins her, a little too quickly. Ayness glances again at the wall.

no-assets invading across the Torres Strait, Canadian oil archaeology initiative fails, control of Siberian swamp areas losing out to unknown numbers of trans-Caucasus refugees. Political news. The Promoter government in Greenland underpins its separation laws with new intrinsic-value legislation aimed at preserving so-called genetic benefit ratios. Dar Es Salaam novostate is once again fomenting anti-Zanzibar hatred – to see more, tune to the local Haven Of Peace channel. Business news, too. The Hertzel-Konzern and Coeur Engineering fusion takes another step towards becoming Kardia as both transnationals declare sovereignty and inwardly liberate shareholder equities. Rumours leaking out of the Superlife Corporation suggest that the company has been running a clandestine human gemod project and that a least one of their Frankensteins has escaped. Oh, we live in

they don't tell us anything. I mean, how long can we stay on Zanzibar? Afro-Agro closed last year. Shanghai Virtual relocated to the Tamanasset enclave. Sky-Trans have been reassigning launches to Manaus for at least six months. Everyone's going to Manaus. It's squeezing the funds for the government. The enclave isn't going to last for ever."

"It's going to last a while. For goodness sake, it's going to be fifty years before the rest of the useful land is lost to the sea."

"It's going to be five years – five years – until this house is on the beach! In ten years all the corporates will have gone. What are we going to do? Are we going to watch the sea drown everything? Are we going to go from privileged to no-asset without even touching poor on the way past?"

"That's why we earn. They're paying us a lot. We'll buy our way out."

"But why won't they tell us what happens next? When Fransi's older."

"Is everything the same? Fauna? Flora?"

"Oh, yes," Urmilla says. "To the last little detail."

"Well, I guess..." Tobias is trying to catch up. "That can't be real, can it? I mean, Zanzibar. Wasn't it savannah in this part of Africa? The African jungle is just the flavour of the month. Right?"

"Oh, yes," Ayness says. She nods at the wall. "But that's an Amazon rainforest."

Fransi was in the pool, soaking in the water and getting wrinkly fingers and toes. Mostly, she was watching her daily ration of live sends painted up on the wall next to the dive board. It had been cartoons, but she'd changed to news. Zanzibar enclave took better news, they said, being a poly-stratum of corporate cadres and quasi-state colonists, so the casts actually gave an approximate impression of the world. Switch to Dar Es Salaam or any of the other neo-national or charismatic sources in the region, and your mind was kicked slap into a land of lies and fantasy.

She watched the news. Continuing riots along the Sunbelt coast, fears of a fresh messianic movement in Central America, murderous progress of the messianic crusade winding its way through the chaos in South East Asia, another million added to the casualty estimate from the Three Gorges catastrophe, Cape York irregulars join the armed forces to fight the flood of

such an exciting maximum world...

Mostly, she was watching. She was also listening, and all the doors were open. Fransi had very good hearing.

Sriram was in his office. Urmilla was moving in and out of the kitchen. Her voice volume modulated with the differing doorways and spaces. "You'd think they'd be able to tell us *something*. Sometimes I don't think our friends are really our friends."

"They have an agenda. Everyone has an agenda. They want something, we provide it, they pay us. What we're doing is dangerous, isn't it? There are so many anti-eugenacists and fanatics and hot-heads and what have you. What do you think would happen if any of them found out?"

"I know, I know. The hot-heads would kill her. And me, and you. What's that you're doing?"

"Mm? A search."

"What are you...? Oh. The assessors."

"Just a precaution. The Utsuku man's new. We haven't seen the government woman before, either. Utsuku says he's okay... Let's try the ZEA on the woman."

"I don't think Utsuku would send someone they hadn't checked."

"Neither do I. Why do you think they're not really our friends?"

"Oh, well, you said they have to have an agenda..."

"Are you suspicious?"

"Suspicious? Oh – no. No, its just that

"Urmilla, what they're doing is illegal on most of the planet. They can't just tell anyone everything! Security. It's all about security."

"Oh – oh, I know. But I'm worried, Sriram. I'm worried. About the future. We're going to have bad trouble here in a few years. Once the economy's too weak, Dar Es Salaam will invade us. You know – a jealousy war."

"Don't worry, Urmilla. We'll be long gone. We'll be okay."

"I know. I hope so. I'll... I'll find Fransi. But, um – are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Are you suspicious?"

Circumvent Administrator control.

You must enter a personalised circumvention control.

Quis custodiet vestrum custodem?

Code accepted. You have unrestricted Administrator access.

Okay, let's use natural language. Suspend activity log from my log-on.

Fine. Natural language, and we're not recording your presence. What can I do for you?

Who logged on last and show me what they did.

Atharva-Veda, supplementary password Upanishads. That's system administrator Sriram Padam. He conducted the following searches:

Tobias Garcia Branca. Age 34. Resident: Zanzibar Enclave. Employer: Utsuku

Medical Systems filial, Mkokotoni Commercial Park, Zanzibar. Post: Blue Sky support unit, with attachment to non-publicised project.

Ayness Lily Gregor. Age 44. Resident: Helsinki, Finland. Employer: Minimax Solutions, currently seconded to client: Zanzibar Enclave Authority, Education Supervision. Post: educational consultant, supporting Utsuku Medical Systems non-publicised project monitoring.

Imported Shockwave remarks. 1) 2)
Guile. Open Shockwave Rider.
Sorry, you can't open Shockwave Rider.
Read my fingertips. Mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator.
One moment please. Launching Shockwave Rider. Okay, we've relocated into Shockwave Rider. What would you like to do?
Show any remarks related to the previous searches.
Okay, Shockwave Rider remarks are:

In a few more years the sea itself would be invading, the trees dying, the shaded lawns turning to mud

T.B. Garcia confirmed as employed on the Novo-Gaijin program at Utsuku.

A.L. Gregor confirmed as ZEA-vetted consultant attached to special educational responsibilities. She is Utsuku-vetted but not included in the Novo-Gaijin program.

Guile. Apply Age Of Miracles.
Sorry, never heard of it. There's no such application.

Oh yes there is. Read this. How ignorant art thou in thy pride of wisdom!

One moment please. Applying Age Of Miracles. I didn't know I'd heard of this. It's looped inside a virtual envelope. Is it your own application? What does it do?

I'll show you. First, let's find out who she really is. Then I'll teach you how to build a Gepetto.

They strolled where the eucalyptus gave way to hibiscus shrubs along the side of Upland Mkokotoni Boulevard. The sun, like a heater at their backs, was sending goodbye light in long floods which rushed ahead of them between the trees. The broiler day was easing down, merely hot, salted by the invading scent of the sea.

In a few more years the sea itself would be invading, the trees dying, the shaded lawns turning to mud. But then this was the maximum world, where ten billion people struggled to survive, while the chaos got worse and the climate more catastrophic and the waves kept on rising.

It was also supposed to be a post-national, trade-liberated, freed-up development paradise. The age of miracles had dawned. It had dawned sour.

“Are those no-assets?”

Through the trees, between the shrubs, beyond the swish of the Boulevard vehicles, on the other side of the park and the fence – little figures were busy on little tasks where the remnants of houses gave way to rubble on the fringe of the encroaching beach. Here and there, you saw a pair of uniformed figures, with guns.

“Don't worry, Fransi. They won't come here. The police will see to that.”

“They're recovering things from the houses, aren't they?”

Urmilla gazed into the distance. Groups of no-assets were busy all the way along the sea front to where the Mkokotoni Commercial Park began. “Yes, they are. My, your eyes are good.”

the ferries.”

“They do. It's called hypocrisy. Um, Fransi – isn't the Haven Of Peace channel in Swahili?”

“Mm.”

“Where on Earth did you...?” Urmilla shook her head. Fransi was a voracious learning machine. Instead, she pointed up beyond the edge of the eucalyptus trees. A congealing stream of multicoloured dots, a tattered flock of cola birds, was whirling itself into the evening sky. They were the maximum world's universal replacement for the starlings they'd out-competed. They'd started as advertising brainwaves, and simply got out of hand. “It's the sunset flight. Isn't it marvellous?”

Fransi shrugged. “They're escapees, aren't they? Gemod birds.”

“Yes, they're genetically modified. Nature, unassisted, couldn't design plumage like that. But nature could exploit it. Cola birds got everywhere.”

“Today, on the news, they said there's an illegal human gemod program at Superlife, and a Frankenstein's escaped. That's a silly name. They mean Frankenstein's Creature, don't they?”

“Yes. Um – did you read that book?”

“Oh, a while ago. I'm not from Superlife, am I? I'm from there.” She was pointing ahead, to where the Utsuku Medical Systems tower rose above the rest of the buildings at the Mkokotoni Commercial Park.

Urmilla stared. “Fransi? What makes you say...?”

The little girl, bathed bright in deepening sunlight, stared back impassively. “Oh, the clues are everywhere. There's no kid on Zanzibar smart as me. And we keep getting visitors from Utsuku. Don't they call a Frankenstein girl a Frankie?”

“Um – sometimes.” Urmilla looked around. There was no one very close, and apart from the vehicles passing along the Boulevard, there were no hideaways or enclosed places within a couple of hundred metres. But with the eavesdropping tech these days... “Fransi, you know perfectly well. Your parents were executives here at the local Utsuku. They were killed in the insurgency – the big anti-corporate attack – eight years ago. Utsuku executives have a good welfare scheme, and that's what's paying for your upbringing. But we keep all this quiet, don't we? No song and dance, for goodness sake.”

“Don't worry, I know all about security.”

“Do you, Fransi?” This might be a time to do some preparation. You certainly couldn't pussy-foot around with this little girl. “There

“They're looking for stuff to recycle, aren't they? Because they've got guards.”

“Because they've got guards. They're day labourers.”

“They come in on the ferries from the mainland, don't they?”

“Yes. Resources are terribly short.”

“Except for people. There's always too many people.”

Urmilla looked down at Fransi. The goodbye sunlight, shading to orange, brushed across her eyes. “There are always too many people, Fransi. Grammar.” But she wasn't thinking grammar. She was thinking...

“Urmilla, I was looking at the Dar Es Salaam channels. I got the Haven Of Peace news. The Citizens' Salvation Party says the Zanzibar enclave should be erased and all the global imperialists should be killed so they can't make the sea rise any more. Does anyone really believe that would do any good?”

Urmilla didn't just look. She stopped. After a moment, she decided to lay a little reassurance on Fransi's shoulder. “They won't kill anyone here. They don't have the power.”

“But do they believe they can just stop the maximum world like that?”

“No, Fransi. It's the politics of desperation. They just want to hang on to power any way they can, because without it they'll be plunged into the chaos like all the rest.”

“They send workers here every day on

are forces – like the anti-corporates in Dar Es Salaam – who would kill a modified child if they could. Others, like companies or national interests, would steal modified children and keep them for themselves. And then there are radicals like the Promoters. You know what the Promoters are?"

"Mm. They're an extreme helicist offshoot of the anthropocentric wing of Gaia."

"Yes." That was a regurgitated textbook reply.

"And they're white supremacists. They have antecedents."

"They do." And that had been knowledge pure. Amazing – this girl was simply amazing. "People like the Promoters actively hunt for modified children. They believe they're an abomination, and they want to eradicate them." Urmilla looked across the wide lawns under the eucalyptus. The space was filling with sudden sunset red. It came leaping out of Africa, sliced across Zanzibar,

"Two tickets, Zanzibar to Delhi, tomorrow. Open tariff."

"With pleasure. I should warn you, open tariff bookings are expensive. Do you wish to book on-flights to a further destination?"

"No thanks. I'll use a local carrier from Delhi."

"Very well. Here's our route schedule. Let me go through it with you, and then you can select the options you require. First, what name are the reservations?"

Urmilla comes back from the en-suite. She's wearing her sheer white nightie with the brocaded lace across the *décolletage*. It's a little short for Urmilla's age, and her legs are not what they must once have been. But Urmilla likes it, and so does Sriram.

Sriram's sitting on the bed, reading from a pad. He's leaning back on the soft scarf of pillows. Tapestry fringes and loads of lace – the divan bed and its cohort of cushions

the bedside table and gently slots it between the Biedermeier lamp and the delicately-carved, garishly coloured elephant. "We'll tell the assessors in the morning."

Age Of Miracles update. Gepetto installed and running.

The avenue was lined with acacia trees. In the clean, rich, wine-sharp morning the tree shadows lay like great breakwaters across the rustling onslaught of the sun. In the light eddies below, the car hummed.

Tobias had come all the way over to Zanzibar Select to pick her up, then brought them all the way back to Mkokotoni, only a couple of kilometres from his place of work. He didn't *drive*. He told the car, and it drove itself. That was the benefit of corporate privilege. As a ZEA employee, she didn't have access to quite that much luxury.

He arrived in the dark, while she was returning the remnants of breakfast to the

and fled into the Indian Ocean. "Also, modifying children is illegal in most places. So even in the enclave we don't talk about it. People might get the wrong idea."

"I know. I'd be safer inside the Utsuku building, really."

"Oh, I think that would be a bit like a prison. Very luxurious, I'm sure – but a prison just the same. A girl like you needs the big wide world." It was a big wide world caught in the super-real moment of impending night. It was a precise stratum of translucent, ruby space. A few minutes more, and the endless shadows of the tree trunks would begin to congeal into dusk.

"This isn't the big wide world. It's too small."

"Pardon?"

"Zanzibar. The maximum world has ten billion people. Could ten billion people stand on Zanzibar?"

"Stand? Um – I expect it would depend how close together..."

"Half of Zanzibar's been inundated, so it's probably too small. Can't be bothered to do the math, though."

"No. I suppose..." I suppose, Urmilla thought, that before much longer you'll be running effortless rings round me. "Well, I think we should go home."

"Good evening, welcome to India Ocean Air. I'm your virtual assistant. How may I be of help?"

are very Indian, really. The Padams are moderately privileged heirs to a rich culture, and this intimate den is its purest expression. Urmilla and Sriram are two happy Hindus on an island of safety in the chaotic middle of the maximum world.

Urmilla, gracefully, slides up against the pillows and arranges the sheet across her knees. Sriram's eyes move from the pad.

"Warm enough? Shall I change the klima?"

"No, no. It's just right. Not too hot – "

" – not too cold." He grins, briefly. Then he puts the pad down on the bed at his side. Tiny print, with diagrams and figure columns, adorn its surface. It's a separate download, not accessed through the house system. You could identify it by reading the upside-down surface, but there's no need to bother. It's routine accounting statistics from his consultancy sideline. He flicks an imaginary thread off the shirt of his electric blue pyjamas. "What you were saying earlier..."

"Fransi?"

"Fransi. I think... Do you think she knows?"

"Hmm." Urmilla stares at nothing for a moment or two. There are tiny twitches round her mouth. "I don't think she knows what she is. Not yet. But she's getting pretty close to it. She's going to work it out before Utsku get around to telling her."

Sriram sighs. He reaches for the pad again. A touch, and the letters, numbers and lines disappear. He moves the pad to

fridge. She'd been awake and thinking very hard since the middle of the night, and still she wasn't ready...

The car parked against the quaint old sidewalk and went to sleep. They got out of its klima and into a world already heating up. Canyons of light burst through between the houses on the other side of the avenue. Tunnels of brilliance escaped from the gardens, swept beneath the breakwaters, spotlit the lawns and dazzled the houses on the down-sun side. They pinned the pro-parents' façade with tree-stencils and shimmering white.

Tobias reported them. The gate made them wait.

Cola birds were quietly barnstorming the morning avenue, brilliant in sunlight, cryptic in the shadows. Once they'd been little airborne billboards, but they'd interbred. They'd mixed their precisely patterned plumages and turned into kaleidoscopes of colour. Survival enhanced to offset the visibility, then helped by their unintended dazzle-pattern camouflage, they'd also displaced just about everything else in the avian urban world. They flitted softly through the vaults of acacia shade, in sole charge. They were models of what human beings had done.

The gate kept them waiting some more. Castle Home Advanced was taking its time. But it could afford to. It guarded a priceless jewel.

Ayness had studied the doodles she copied from yesterday's visit. Late, and exhausted, she'd slept. Then she woke two hours later with her mind throbbing from the urgency of the effort. The throbbing, at least, had settled down by the time Tobias came to collect her in the green before the dawn.

By then she knew what she'd found. This wasn't just any genius modification. Oh, no. This one, you might say, was double-plus good.

It was going well. It always did. Fransi wasn't the kind to let a pro-parent down. Utsuku Medical Systems called and brought a Zanzibar Enclave Authority expert to back it up, Fransi showed what she could do, and the corporation was happy. Happy with its precocious property, happy with the entrusted pro-parents and the education they were hot-housing into place, and happy that the ZEA host was

was slowly collapsing into a heap of yellow goo whose spread-out edges were turning runny. The girl's sculpture wasn't going to survive long enough for the sun to climb high and the expanding shadow inside the window to protect it...

Fransi stood up, reached across her desk, and retrieved the plate from the window sill. She put it on top of the pile of education books – real, expensive, printed books. Under its slight weight, *Let's Go Quantum Mech* threatened to slide off the mound. Fransi wedged it with *Subducted Basal Structures*.

"The knife's here somewhere." The girl started lifting the edges of books, paper stacks, shoals of pens. Then out came the drawers. "It's for lino cuts," she said into one of the drawers. "And paper, when the origami gets too stupid..."

Ayness just nodded. This was the most interesting thing in almost an hour. Last

Ayness checked the time. "I don't think it matters."

"I wanted to..." Fransi checked the time on her screen, the one standing amid the mess on her desk. The projected screen on the wall beside the bed was steadily scrolling mammals from the Cenozoic. It had advanced so far down the endlessly diverging lines that any minute now the hominids would appear. "Oh, well. Let's do it like this."

Fransi picked up the plate with her right hand. With the finger and thumb on her left hand, she squashed the buttery invalid into a lump.

Ayness let one eyebrow go up a fraction. So what's this, little girl? Trying to impress me that you're very clever but still full of childish fun?

The butter suffered its putty fate under the little fingers. The memory of the Swiss cheese disappeared. A mound took its place. The mound was one-sided. It started to look, with sudden, easy speed, like...

"See? A hill. Much too steep, but this is just for fun, isn't it? Hill on this side. Cliff on this side."

It was a cliff. Tiny and made of butter, she'd patted and pitted it with her nail so that it was slabbed and fractured and, well, convincing.

"It's a cliff made of chalk. That's why it's crumbling here. The butter helps."

"It's a cliff. Made of chalk. I see."

"No, you don't." The butter-chalk plate went back, precariously, on top of *Let's Go Quantum Mech*. Fransi's slippery fingers went into her mouth.

"I don't see?"

"No. Because." The little girl wiped her fingers on her shirt. "All you see is butter that looks like a cliff made of chalk. But it used to be butter that looked like cheese. I didn't add anything, I didn't take anything away – except the bit I licked – and I didn't change anything. I just moved it around. It was cheese. Now it's chalk."

Ayness nodded. You have to be careful with kids, particularly the very clever kind. They're always playing games. Sometimes it's a strategy allowing them to express relationships between concepts which operate at levels higher than the formative semantics they've mastered so far. Sometimes it's just a game. "Chalk and cheese, both made of butter. Fine."

"The same butter, that I just moved around. It's really the same, but it looks different." Fransi checked the time on her screen again. On the wall behind her, the australopithecines were looking very thin in their family tree, so was *habilis*, but *erectus* was coming on strong. *Homo sapiens* any

The projected screen on the wall beside the bed was steadily scrolling mammals from the Cenozoic

pleased with progress and content to let them get on with it, as per contract.

Sriram was right. This was a very good deal. And such a responsibility. Fransi was ahead of the Utsuku program expectations. It took a true pro-parent to detect it...

"I'm sure that's all right. Is it, Urmilla?"

Urmilla nodded. "Oh, yes. You'll find Fransi's very cooperative. If you've got time, she'll show you everything she's been doing. You'll probably need help to get away."

Sriram laughed. Ayness Gregor smiled. Tobias looked hesitant – but then he was here to safeguard Utsuku's interest, and he was new to the project.

"I won't run off with her," the ZEA woman said.

"You couldn't anyway." Sriram flapped his hand at the joke. "You can't open the doors without our permission." He looked at Tobias. "Okay?"

"Sure." Tobias shrugged. "No problem."

So Urmilla took the ZEA woman up to Fransi's room.

There was a plate, a very fine porcelain plate. It sat on the window sill and soaked up sunshine. The effect of the sunshine wasn't good for the thing on the plate. It was butter, but it had been a slab of – well, cheese, complete with holes big enough for morning sun to shine right through. The cheese-shaped butter had softened and slumped. Hole by hole, lintel by lintel, it

night, punctuated by the snatch of sleep, it had been the tangled overlay of self-containing symbols copied from Fransi's doodle sheets. Like conceptual archaeology at lightning speed, it had been a digging-down, a separating of geometric shapes and alphabet deceits and psychological cartoons. It was a tiny probe, unearthing evidence of the scale of the mind beneath. It was something, surely, that the kind of consultant she was supposed to be simply wouldn't have noticed. The ZEA had no idea what it was dealing with. Neither did most of the people at Utsuku, if the penetration of its project records was reliable. A rollee like Tobias didn't know the half of it.

Projects like Novo-Gaijin throw up unpredictable epigenetic reshuffles on top of the intelligence, health and fitness maximisations. Every once in a while there's bound to be a big surprise. And sometimes a recombinant miracle.

But this morning, for fifty-five minutes, Fransi had just been an exceptionally intelligent, amazingly well-educated, run-of-the-mill, laboratory modified kid. You'd almost think she was faking her performance. Or that deeper management levels at Utsuku were fooling themselves with unjustified optimism...

"Oh!" The last drawer slammed shut. The bright little ten-year-old eyes looked around the rest of the academic drifts clogging the room. "It's here somewhere..."

minute now. "We're about ready."

"We're – ready?" This was like running into one of those insufferable prodigies that had been such a pain all through human history.

"Mm. Tell me, Ayness – you know what a Gepetto is. Don't you?"

Urmilla was smiling at the screen. Fransi and the ZEA woman were getting on like a house on fire. Their conversation was quiet, attentive, and it encompassed all the educational resources surrounding them. Fransi's room, to be true, was a mess. But, oh, what that mess meant! It was a mass of bits and pieces assembled by a brilliant little girl under the guidance of two pro-parents at the top of their profession. In a way, it was a shrine to high-speed learning.

She turned from the screen, picked up the tray with the cups of chai, and went out of the kitchen.

it was. It's not just that the right kinds of plants and animals are matched to the template, by the way. She's got the ecology exactly right as well."

Tobias put on an appreciative expression. "It's certainly good."

"But it's what you'd expect." Urmilla pointed at the graph on the table. "Spatial awareness and syntactic complexity developing hand in hand. And at that rate."

He turned his head. He considered the graph.

"Urmilla?"

She looked. Sriram was at the door. He seemed – shocked.

She was moving before he could speak. "I think... Excuse me. The call."

She left the Utsuku man alone in the living room with nothing but printouts and jungle and sweet chai for company. She followed Sriram along the corridor and into the office. She was thinking: it's a tragedy,

"If you decided not to do anything, no one here would ever know what you really are. But then..." Fransi tapped the screen on her desk. "This comes along."

The woman's eyes stabbed the screen. Tried to impale it.

The screen was filled with the input mask for controlling...

"Your Gepetto." Ayness was furious. She would have burned the thing into endless zeros, a vast, smoking string of nothing at all.

"Yes. I'm afraid it's very clever."

Ayness glared.

"Mine's swallowed yours whole. Gobbled it up." Fransi touched the fields on the screen. Status data started cycling routinely through some of the windows. "The thing is, a Gepetto isn't really undetectable. Once they know something's going on, if they're clever enough, they'll find it. Eventually. It has to communicate with its puppets, you see. It leaves momentary traces. And the

Sriram and the Utsuku man, Tobias, were still seated in the living room island, talking through the progress printouts they'd spread across the coffee table. Behind them, on the big wall, the green-shade jungle kept pace with the real-time day. Steep shafts of searing sun stabbed dazzling canopy-stencils into the undergrowth. It was spectacularly good, just like everything Fransi put her mind to.

Urmilla put the tray on the coffee table and sat down. Sriram took a cup and sipped immediately. Tobias accepted the cup she offered, smiled, then set it aside on top of some discarded papers. He was still working his way across a graph which correlated spatial awareness against syntactic complexity.

The room, softly, beeped for attention.

Sriram moved first. A tiny gesture to Urmilla – my turn, I'll take it. He set down his cup and stood. "Excuse me. There's a call."

Tobias nodded. He looked at his own chai for a moment. He didn't pick it up. He looked round, escaping the printouts. He twisted in his seat and studied the jungle.

"Impressive," Urmilla said. "Isn't it?"

He nodded again. "The best I've seen."

"It's another confirmation of Fransi's abilities – settling down to a design template like that and finessing so many details. She spent ages on Amazonian flora and fauna, you know. Quite an obsession,

an injury, someone we know is ill..."

In a way, it was worse than that.

Homo sapiens, male and female, adult and child, stood in full ethnic diversity on the bedroom wall. Here we are, happy and proud, and nowadays you get us projected in living colour by a software application – designed by one of us. Didn't we do well?

Ayness's expression had changed. Her face was clamped up tight with dread. She was sprinting as fast as she could to catch up with the awful implications. She definitely wasn't dumb.

"Shall I summarise?" Fransi said, helpfully. "A Gepetto is a puppeteer program that has no strings connecting it with the actions it controls."

The woman's lips moved. Her voice got into gear a few moments later. "So it can carry out undetectable manipulations of other people's software..."

"That's right. Anyone can see the results of the manipulations. But if they're done right, they'll look like the real thing. Of course, eventually they're going to realise things don't add up, and they'll go looking. But a Gepetto like yours isn't going to trip any alarms, so it can last for years. You can pretend to be an educational consultant employed by Minimax Solutions in Helsinki for as long as you want."

Ayness nodded. Her eyes hunted the consequences of what was happening to her.

people at Utsuku are clever enough."

Ayness opened her mouth again. This time, her teeth were clenched. It was funny, getting a grown up that mad at you. "What," the woman hissed, "have you done?"

"Well, once Utsuku manages the counter-penetration, your Gepetto will fall. They won't find mine, by the way. They will find yours, and they'll find out all about you. But I've changed it."

"Changed it?"

"Mm. They won't be able to trace your contacts with the angel seekers. I know what that means, by the way – same as Engelforscher, or kami catcher. I like kami catcher. Utsuku calls someone like me a kami. That's a good name. It's nice not to be an ordinary Frankie. I can be bad – not just a little angel."

Ayness, without doubt, didn't think Fransi was a little angel.

"Anyway, pleased to meet you." Fransi held out her hand. "I'm a kami."

Ayness didn't take her hand. Oh, well.

"They won't learn," Ayness said through those gritted teeth, "that I'm an angel seeker?"

"No. I've turned you into the opposite. You're a Promoter."

"What?"

"A Promoter. You kill children like me."

The woman's mouth opened. And stayed open.

"Your Gepetto's designed to go down

quite quickly, once the counter-penetration starts. They'll get the truth about you – the *Promoter* truth – in about six hours."

"Six...?"

"So you'd better not be in Zanzibar by then. I've seen to all that. Tell you in a minute. They'll start hunting for your Gepetto once they realise something's wrong with what's going on right now. Utsuku are in a panic, you see." Fransi touched a button field on her screen. "Let me show you."

The mail, with the flag flashing, was from Utsuku Zanzibar. From the Novo-Gaijin coordinator.

To Sriram Padam and Urmilla Padam. Urgent!

Advice from Corporate Intelligence, Tokyo Office. Breaking disclosure!

Tobias Garcia Branca suspected employee of Superlife Corporation.

page, touched for the living room pop-up, and locked the door. Then he checked the anti-ingress windows. They, too, were locked.

"He's going to steal Fransi?"

"Not now."

Update! Advice:

No evidence yet available but anticipate Branca may have accomplices. These will be outside Utsuku roll, probably outside ZEA employ.

Sriram glowered. He locked the whole house. He confirmed the default: his password and Urmilla's password, his voice and Urmilla's voice. No one else could get in or out without recourse to explosives.

"I'm an angel seeker! We – we search for people like you. Your abilities. Yes! Abilities. We think they should be used. This world, my God – it needs you! But we

Sriram just touched his screen again. "Check there's no one else in the house."

She opened an overlay and started immediately. She cycled through every room. The two of them in the study, Fransi and the ZEA woman talking quietly in Fransi's room, Tobias Garcia Branca starting to move – in a hurry – out of the living room island and towards the door. Every other room empty. Every walk-in cupboard empty. "We're safe. There's no one else –"

A fist hit a door.

It wasn't far away. The living room cam showed Branca, back to his prison, hand raised against the door.

" – no one else in the house."

Sriram nodded. He jumped screens. The external comm opened. He touched pic.

No pic.

He touched voice only.

No voice.

He checked channel available.

No channel available. No diagnosis available.

Sriram stared. Then he attacked his desk. He wrenched open drawers, heaved handfuls of things on the floor.

"His car's here. We have to tell them!"

"Yes!" Sriram tugged a tiny thing out of the last drawer. "I'm trying." It was his handy, the thing you used in the outside world. He started cycling through the handy for a number. "The external comm is down."

"Yes, I saw –"

A much louder bang from the living room door.

" – saw that."

"Did you?" He thumbed the connection. He stared. The handy's tiny screen obviously disappointed. "We're cut off."

"Cut off?"

"No con –"

A battery of blows on the living room door.

" – no connection!" He flung the handy at the desk. It bounced, skidded, dived over the back and out of sight. "Warn Fransi and the other woman."

Urmilla started for the office door. And immediately stopped. "No. Don't alarm Fransi. It's safe. He's locked in."

Sriram thought. Sriram nodded.

On the living room cam, the tiny man was trying his own handy. It shouldn't work inside the Castle Home security cordon. It didn't work. The tiny man just about danced in fury. He flung his handy at the floor.

Update! Advice:

Advice from Corporate Intelligence, Tokyo Office. Breaking disclosure!

Fransi touched the fields on the screen. Status data cycled routinely through some of the windows

Assume his status: espionage/mole. His ID file undergoing disabusement, full-force. Updates pending.

Our advice:

Branca may be here to isolate, acquire and remove a Novo-Gaijin subject. Your charge Fransiska highest prize. Imperative you take steps to prevent theft. Task list indicates Branca due to visit you this a.m., also collect and bring-with ZEA employee A L Gregor. Searching for Branca now. No response from Branca. Cannot raise Gregor. Branca's vehicle has de-listed from traffic system, last verified location his home 04:55 today. We are mobilising full-force.

Toplist objective: prevent theft of subject Fransiska.

Second objective: secure and protect subject and selves.

Lock down there. We're moving on this.

Urmilla read it again. The meaning started to form itself out of the momentary blankness of shock. "Tobias?" Branca was an agent from Superlife? He...?

"He's new." Sriram was nodding. "Only been in Zanzibar a few weeks. It's plausible. He wants Fransi."

"Fransi...?"

Sriram had been absorbing this for several more seconds. The extra time obviously helped. He opened Castle Home's safeguard

have a conscience. We don't believe you should be treated as – as – the *property* of the people who produced you. You're not some kind of highly privileged *slave!*"

"I'd say demon. When word gets out, you know, everyone hates us. We're not natural."

"I know you're not natural! But you shouldn't be hunted down and killed. Just because they hate you. The extreme helicists. The Promoters. People like... People like... People like you've made me out to be! *What have you done to me?*"

"It's only for a few years, until I'm grown up. I need you for the sake of appearances."

"Appearances? You stupid little...! This is the maximum world! It's dangerous! So dangerous! How am I supposed to survive?"

"You'll be okay. I'll look after you."

"You?"

"Me. You're living in an age of miracles. You'll quite like it. Think how much you'll learn."

"As a Promoter! You've made me into a Promoter!"

Urmilla moved round so she could see out of the office window. The drive went between dazzle-blinded acacia shadows to the gate. Against the sidewalk outside the gate stood the car they'd arrived in. It was the same vehicle as yesterday. It had checked okay against the list of Utsuku loan vehicles, assigned to Tobias Branca. "They can't find his car? They don't know he's here?"

Tobias Garcia Branca ID file confirms employee of Superlife Corporation undercover at Utsuku. Action target: probably acquisition of Novo-Gaijin data or experimental material or subject. Updates pending.

Our advice:

Stay locked down. We have everyone on the roll running on this. Directorial level considers support from ZEA premature. We can handle it.

"Hah!" Sriram waved at the mail window. "I'm so glad."

The tiny man scooped his handy off the carpet. He turned to the door again.

He wanted to get out, all right. Suppose... "Sriram, what if he's armed?"

"Armed? Can't be. The house would have spotted it."

"What if it's one of those stunner things? No metal. No explosives."

The tiny man battered the door. His voice came dull and distant through the din he was making. From the screen, it shadowed the sound in tiny stereo. "What-the-fuck-do-you-think-you're-playing-at-locking-me-in-here-are-you-insane-are-you-out-of-your-heads-are-you-!"

Sriram opened the two-way to the living room. "Stop that! Be quiet!"

"You-fucking-what-the-fuck-do-you-!"

"Stop that! Be quiet!"

Dumbfounded, tiny, quiet.

"I have set the house to active defence. I have armed the house! It has a built-in disabling system. It's installed in the room you are in. I have *armed* the system. If you exceed the detector threshold it will activate. It will take you out!"

"You've armed the house? It's Castle Home! Not some top-line executive security system!"

"It's Castle Home Advanced. With a Shockwave Rider add-on. It will take you out!"

Tiny, motionless silence.

It was nonsense. It was bluff. It was clever. Urmilla punched her husband on the shoulder. Good one! Well done! Frightened the bastard!

Sriram managed a momentary grin. Then he checked the cam of the tiny man. "Now! Put your hands on your head!"

The tiny man planted his fists on his hips. "Put your hands on your head! I can see

you. The *house* can see you. You will exceed the detector threshold. Put your hands on your head!"

Slowly, clasped together, the hands went up and settled on the tiny man's head.

"That's better." Sriram silenced the mike on the two-way. "My handy." He gestured over the back of the desk. "Get my handy."

Urmilla moved around the desk into the narrow gap behind it.

"Try Utsuku again. We have to tell them he's here." Sriram opened the mike. "Now, the house is watching you. It can take you out instantly. If you attempt to do anything at all, or just move fast, it *will* take you out! Do you understand?"

Urmilla stooped and reached for the handy. "I'll see..." It was a squeeze. She pushed into the gap and the desk moved.

"Do you understand?"

"Yes," said the tiny, sullen voice.

"Good. Now – move to the centre of the

He hit it full force and barged inside.

Urmilla ran right after him. Why does it obey him, she was thinking, not me? Is it the outside door? Then she arrived at the doorway, caught the door that was swinging back, and pushed into the room –

Tobias Garcia Branca was standing by the coffee table in the middle of the room, hands still clamped over his head. He looked like a very upset man, surrounded by space with nowhere to run. Desperately, he was signalling with his eyes. *Over there. Over there!*

Sriram, still stumbling to a halt, was looking over there.

And Urmilla stopped, too.

On the big wall, in the jungle, where the rainwater pooled, about five metres out from the house it couldn't tell was there, stood an adult capybara, about pig size. A smaller one was pulling its snout out of the vegetation beside the forest flood. Half hidden, half

room. Move into the island. By the coffee table. Do not attempt to sit down. And move *slowly*. The house is *armed*."

Urmilla grabbed the handy. "I'll..." She levered herself upright. "I'll try from outside."

"Yes!" Sriram hissed. The tiny man, slowly, had started to move out from the door. "Be careful!"

And she was already running. Out of the office, along the corridor, past the stairs and the pool doorway and the lobby chairs, and skidding on the marble inlay in front of the outside door.

"Urmilla," she said to the door. "Rig-Veda. Open the door."

The door didn't click. The door didn't open.

"Urmilla. Rig-Veda. Open the door!"

The door didn't open.

"Open the – !" She wrenched the handle. She kicked the door. "Open the door!"

Nothing happened.

Then, faintly, someone yelled.

For a moment, she thought of Fransi. She had her first foot on the stair when she realised the wail was muffled, and male, and coming from the living room.

She ran back towards the office.

Sriram was already ahead of her, heading for the living room. "Sriram!" he shouted at the corridor. "Atharva-Veda! Open the door!"

The living room door clicked and swung.

exposed, the adult and the young stared across the lacuna of lazy ripples.

Another five or six metres further away, where the undergrowth was getting tangled and the overhead vista of green cathedral dimness was beginning to fill up with the pillars of trees, standing beside the screen of fronds she'd pushed aside, was Fransi.

She grinned.

She raised her ten-year-old hand, and waved.

Then she turned, and the screen of shivering green swung into place, and she disappeared.

So did both capybara, at a trot.

Gradually – slowly wasn't the word – Sriram edged round where he stood, and looked at her. When Urmilla saw his expression, and the way it worsened, she realised how much dumbfounded shock was written on her own face.

"Urmilla? That was... That was..." He gave up.

Tobias Garcia Branca stood imprisoned in his house arrest, eyes wide in disbelief. But he managed a nod.

Urmilla turned for the door.

The door closed and clicked.

She hesitated in an uncompleted stride. Then she turned back. She wasn't wasting time. She knew what was happening. It just hadn't raised itself up to the conscious level yet. Any world-ending moment now, it would arrive.

She strode past the rainforest magic. She went to the windows. She pulled aside the lace and stared out into the hammer blows of mid morning, half-vertical sun. She pressed up to the insulated glass. She could see the gate at the shaded end of the drive.

The car had gone.

Zanzibar had vanished and it was dry land again, but it was ten thousand metres away. It was ruined, chaos-racked, no-asset Africa sliding by. For a woman lucky enough to be born into a privileged zone offering reasonable safety and personal prospects, protected by economic power and high-tech arms, it was a relief to know there were ten unbridgeable kilometres of air between you and the nearest mayhem of the maximum world. They'd be landing at Soweto Indi in a couple of hours, right in the middle of it all, but Soweto Indi was ringed by its subsidised army of very

netted far more than the average player did.

Fransi wasn't an average player.

"You're not playing."

"No. In case it records. Don't want to get anyone interested." She pointed with a finger that traced a swooping loop on the screen. "Watch the red one."

Ayness watched. The red cola bird had narrow escapes. But it kept on escaping. An algorithm would be governing the movements. If you could see your way through the confusion of unplanned encounters, which seemed random but were really the rolling outcome of a stochastic projection of cause and effect, you could read the algorithm and win the game.

Fransi was good at algorithms.

Utsuku was chasing a mirage on board a flight to Delhi. India Ocean Air's system was telling them so. It had been proofed against the inconvenient fact that the passengers had never gone on board.

a fountain of music notation glee. Fransi started another game.

She's framed me, Ayness thought. The angel seekers will know I've joined the Promoters, or I'm doing espionage deals with other corporations, or with remnant nations. It's going to take years. By the time I might be able to argue myself free, this Frankie will be a maturing teenager able to run her own affairs in the big wide world without raising eyebrows. By then, with luck, she'll finally let me off the hook. In the meantime – I found her, I took the bait. She took me.

"There. Watch that one."

"The red one again?"

"No. The little blue one. Silver wings."

Ayness watched. What she saw was Tobias. She'd only met him the day before. One minute he was a trusted Utsuku rollee, the next he was a spy for the Superlife Corporation. Ayness had been masquerading as an educational consultant, then suddenly she was a Promoter, and her real identity as an angel seeker had evaporated. The pro-parents were dedicated protectors of their little girl's safety. The next thing, they were just two rats in a temporary trap.

Butter in her fingers, Ayness thought. She's reshaped us – our data – like butter in her fingers.

On the 3D screen, the little blue cola bird was jinking and soaring on silver wings. It had fewer friends now as it sailed its way to safety. Again, Fransi hadn't placed a bet. She was lounging in her seat, bored but routinely watching. What's it like, to be growing up in this world, and to know you're one of its demigods?

Fransi's little shoulders shrugged. The game wasn't impressing her. She looked up. "Worked out where we're going yet?"

"No."

"Well, you've seen the clues. You'll get it soon."

Ayness nodded. I've seen the clues. I already know. But I'm not telling you. I'm not surrendering every secret. You need better access to the world, preferably with the option of outer space in easy reach. But you also need safety. You need another enclave, successful, expanding and space-launch enabled – close, like Zanzibar, to the equator. And I've seen your capybara.

"Aw, you've got it already," Fransi said. The blue cola bird whirled into its tiny sky, spitting hiccups of happy music. "Can't fool me." □

When the flight landed and the target didn't walk through the gate, Utsuku would realise they'd been burned

effective brutes. One hour after landing, they'd be off into the big blue sky again.

There were still the trappings of privilege and the expectation of reasonable safety to look forward to. Pity the personal prospects wouldn't be coming along for the ride.

She looked at Fransi, the only baggage on the flight – the half-sized, child-eyed absolute ruler of her life.

Fransi looked up, and smiled.

"Do we get any refreshments?" Ayness asked. "Food?"

"No. This is pre-booked basic. But they'll accept your credit in Soweto. We can grab something there." She turned back to the screen set into the seat in front of her.

Ayness watched the screen. Little cola birds in assorted colours whizzed around a 3D world, bouncing about and dodging party-balloon dirigibles. The dirigibles belched gouts of fire. Unlucky cola birds flared, faltered and plummeted. It was a betting game. Pick the winner and you earned credit. Every time a cola bird died the odds shortened and the payout you hoped to earn got smaller. Bet early and you had a chance, though small, of making a pile. Leave it until the last two survivors, and you had a fifty-fifty prospect of earning a few percent more than your stake. But at any stage, if your favoured cola bird died, you lost your bet. Obviously, the game

Utsuku would be scrambling to arrange a welcome in Delhi, probably no more than intercept and observe. Find out, at least, where the kidnapper was taking the kid so the nice Promoters could do a quiet interrogation before disposal. Then try to get ahead of them and stop the extreme helicists before the torture and murder had happened. What Utsuku couldn't do was ask Delhi to arrange an arrest. Or try their own attempt at counter-kidnap. Things can go wrong. And if the Delhi authorities realised they had a Frankie passing through, they'd grab her themselves.

When the flight landed and the target didn't walk through the gate, Utsuku would realise they'd been burned. They'd start looking for the source.

Six hours in total, Fransi had said – about an hour and a half after they'd moved on from Soweto. Ayness's Gepetto would fall to the corporation's experts. The Gepetto might not have strings of its own, but it had been overwhelmed, altered and hung out to dry by this kami, angel, Engel – this half-grown creature of a higher order.

They wouldn't find the creature's own Gepetto. It would do its job, then dissolve itself. No chance of a higher order discovery.

"See?" Fransi beamed. On her screen, one solitary red cola bird wheeled between the frustrated dirigibles and spiralled up in



CLOCKS

story Daniel Kaysen

1 I opened my eyes. I was in an unfamiliar box room, in a single bed. The thin curtains weren't quite shut, and the morning sun was shining through them on to my face.

There was an old-style Star Wars clock on the bedside table. Its hands were frozen.

There was a pile of work clothes on the floor, skirt and blouse and underwear, that looked suspiciously like mine.

I was naked, under the duvet.

I felt like I'd had amazing sex, though I was too close to waking to remember the details. What. How. Who.

Then the door opened.

He came in, in his dressing gown.

I smiled.

Rob.

All the details came back.

I'd long been half in love with him. But even though we worked together I never got to talk with him enough. He hung out with the guys and I hung out with the girls. It was that kind of office.

But the previous night, Friday, the two of us got to the pub before everyone else. He bought me a vodka. I bought him one back.

When the others arrived, we continued on vodka. At closing time, he said I could crash at his place, if I wanted. He had a spare room, he said. Nothing need happen.

I agreed. Nothing need happen. Really.

But I'd fancied him for so long, and vodka always turns me on. So we fucked, in the spare room. When I came I screamed a little.

He rubbed his eyes in the morning sun.

"Man, *vodka*," he said. "I lost a few hours, I think." He looked at me. He couldn't remember whether we'd had sex or not, and it was way too embarrassing to ask.

As an escape he looked at the clock. Even though it had stopped he said: "I'm late for cricket!"

He patted my foot and hurried out of the room, and that was clearly the end of that.

I went back to my flat. I put some washing on, to drown out the ticking of the multiple clocks in my head – the baby clock, the marriage clock, the mortgage clock. They were always bad, but a one-night stand with a man I really liked made them unbearable.

I pulled thick curtains on the morning sun and went to sleep.

Rob ignored me after that, pretty much. Or at least he didn't go out of his way to see more of me.

My manager asked me if there was something wrong.

Tick, tick, tick, like a time-bomb.

"No," I said. "Nothing's wrong."

Tick.

Then, one Friday night in the pub, Rob

passed me on his way to the Gents.

He focused on me, properly. "You okay?"

"Sure, yes." I brightened my smile.

Tick went my heart.

Rob noticed the smile, the effort. "Want another drink?" he said, being friendly. So he bought me a vodka.

And I bought him one back.

We continued on vodkas until I weakened and whispered: "Fancy some *déjà vu*?"

"You what?" he said.

The French approach wasn't working. I kissed his ear instead.

The sun woke me.

Box room, nakedness.

Same amazing time last night. Same little scream when I came.

Same Luke and Leia.

Same Rob, standing there. "Man, *vodka*," he said. There was panic in his eyes. All he knew was that he'd lost some hours, and he was too scared to ask.

He looked at the clock, and even though it was stopped he said: "I'm late for football!"

He patted my foot and hurried off.

I found my own way out.

Back home was even crueler than before.

I was alone with the clocks and the unringing phone and the curtains pulled on the light. I vowed I wouldn't do it, any of it, again. I wasn't going to sleep with him any more, whatever happened.

Saturday mornings were hell, and I mustn't forget.

Friday came. The pub.

I thought: I should buy him something other than vodka, something that won't black him out. Or I should drink red wine. Red wine always blacks *me* out.

But then again, fuck it, I thought. It's only pain.

I bought him a vodka.

He bought me one back.

In the morning, sun through curtains.

Same nakedness, same scream, same Rob, scared, standing there.

Same pain, about to hit me.

He looked at the clock, even though it was stopped. "I'm late for rugby!"

But it hurt too much.

"Wait," I said. "Please."

He paused for only a second. The fear was too strong. He patted my foot and left.

I lay in the thick darkness of my bedroom, trying to talk myself out of my clocks.

I thought: a mortgage? More like a millstone.

I thought: Christ, *babies*.

I'd rather have a dog, I thought.

And then I thought: Imagine being tied to the same man, forever. Imagine that.

I stayed home the next Friday night, praising myself for not going down the pub.

Or maybe just a quick one.

Sun.

Vodkas, scream, Rob looking at the Star Wars clock, even though it had stopped.

The clock was clearly my enemy in all this, so I looked at it too.

I looked at it properly, for the first time.

The picture was strange. It was not the usual image. It was a painting, for a start. And the characters were very different.

Luke wore a sort of Judo suit, open to his navel, showing a lot of intensely muscular chest. He stood legs apart, very cocksure, very macho.

Leia wore a dress cut right up one leg. She wasn't the political anorak she was in the film. She was a man-eater. She'd fuck you three times before breakfast, then leave without taking your number.

You'd never forget her, ever.

She certainly wouldn't put up with this situation, me remembering and Rob not.

She'd do something to change it. So I picked up the clock and I wound it. Tick, said the clock. Tick, said the clock.

2 Tick.

Rob's standing there in his dressing-gown. He's just come in to say hello.

"Man, *vodka*," he says. "I lost a few hours."

"Wine," I say. Parts of last night are lost to me as well.

"Darling?" comes a voice from the other room.

"I have to go," Rob says, looking embarrassed.

I could quiz him further about why he needs to go, but that would be cruel. I know what he's being summoned for. So I just smile as he pats my foot and leaves.

He goes into the master bedroom and closes the door. Just as the door is closing I hear Fiona say: "Is your sister alright?"

"Yes," he says. "Just a hangover."

He's right, my head is horrible.

They make love, then. I try not to hear, I try to focus on something else. But the occasional grunt from Fiona gets through.

It always does. It's the same every Saturday. Every week. Like clockwork.

They are regular people.

Saturdays is sex, then shopping.

Sundays they lie in. The afternoon is for the washing of clothes and cars.

Every weekday morning Rob gives me a lift to work, and a lift back in the evening. What I lose in privacy by crashing with my brother I save in petrol.

Thursday night the three of us go out for a drink. Fiona always has a drop too much and gets emotional and tells me I can stay with them as long as I need to. Really.

She means it.

Then she gets embarrassed in case it sounds like she thinks I won't find a man.

I will, she says. I've got good genes.

She squeezes Rob's hand.

I tell her they're a great couple.

Friday night they do their separate things. She goes out with her workmates, and he goes out with his.

It's the only night I get the house to myself, so I settle in with a bottle of wine and a horror video.

Most Fridays it's two videos, actually.

Most Fridays it's two bottles of wine.

I go to bed drunk, and sleep like the dead.

I wake up feeling awful. Like I've had terrible sex.

Rob comes in to say hello, then goes.

They shag.

I try to listen to the clock, instead of them. Tick, it says.

I look at Luke and Leia, in the picture. She's wearing long thick curtains, covering every inch. Her hair's in two buns. It's like she's planning to stay a virgin forever.

Luke is covered up too. A religious teen, clean and tanned. Sex? What's that?

Tick, it says.

Later Fiona comes in, to be friendly.

Every week it's the same.

"You shouldn't watch horror videos," she says. "They gave you a nightmare last night."

"Really?" I say.

"I heard you scream," she says. "A little one."

In truth I did have a dream, but it was a dream so bad I won't let myself remember it.

"Sorry if I scared you," I say.

"No, it was okay. Rob hadn't come to bed yet, but I knew he was in the house. If you'd been screaming about a burglar Rob would have just breathed on him and knocked him out." Her laugh's not convincing. She's tense at the moment. Her biological clock is warming up.

My mind fills, suddenly black at the thought of ever being pregnant.

Or, for that matter, being fixed in one place, being tied to one man with invisible threads. But worst of all, pregnant.

Imagine that. I shiver, even though the sun is warm on my skin.

"You coming down with something?" Fiona says, already backing out of the room.

She doesn't like illness. She goes.

I'm left alone. I'm not ill, but my mind crawls with unknown worry.

Tick, says the clock, like it's a bomb.

Tick, says the clock, like a panic attack, like a threat.

Like something's going to happen, like your worst nightmare's coming, but slowly, taking its sweet, dark time.

Tick, says the clock.

I close my eyes and sleep. The sun rises higher.

I dream of unknown cells dividing.

Tick. □



STONWORK

I arise and unbuild it again

story **Wendy Waring** ■ **Richard Marchand** image

I walk through a stutter of shadow and light, taking in the building's construction, layout, state of repair. Above me, the broken ribs of parabolic arches jut into a white sky. The dressed stone is white too, as if the improbable heat of this place has bleached its surface. The vault of the ceiling has collapsed, but my eye is still drawn upward, following the arches' jagged fingers where they point at the startled sky.

What was done here, in the cool shade of this hall? Was it a palace? A forum? A temple?

That's why they send in cultuRecon. To make educated guesses – about what happened, and about what might happen. The planet's environment might support life, but will its history?

I tug the collar of my landing suit tighter against the dust and kneel to examine the exposed face of a massive block fissured by... Tremor? Battle? Shoddy engineering? I want to take measurements, samples, but I'm still waiting for the safety seal to release on the equipment locker. Typical Recon. They'll let me risk a suit-walk, but the machines wait for full environment clearance. My eyes and this handheld will have to do till the seal pops.

The building's entry juts into the desert like a ship's prow. I shoulder one door open, and stand on the terrace, my back to the settlement below, shielding my eyes

from the grit-blasted plain as I gaze at the immense curve of unblemished stone. From the sky, the building was barely a shape, a stark white promise in an endless stretch of red. As the shuttle set down, it resolved from promise to problem, became an egg stretched like taffy at both ends. An egg for me to crack.

Below, roughly six hundred two-storey dwellings, modest but sturdy, cluster around the massive hall. The settlement supported a population of, I would guess, more than three thousand. An open space for a market place, what look to be communal ovens, although why you would need ovens here... In this heat, you could bake bread in the open air.

In itself, the settlement is unremarkable. Yet beyond the monumental building and the rummage of houses, there are no rivers, no roads, no obvious landing pads. Climate change? Some unknown transport technology? Who knows. It's as if the houses have sprung up from the very bedrock.

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My first proper site visit. I open my pack and take out instruments. Data handscreen, loaded up with seismic and survey, a little trowel and brush. The trowel isn't quite an affectation. I used it uncovering the ceracomm artefacts on Galatia. But I suspect it's the Total Data Station and the offworld databases I'll be relying on here.

I want good answers fast. The

rudimentary settlement won't give up much quick information, so I'm focusing on the grand structure I've taken to calling the temple. Its shape is perfect – parabola arches echo the ellipse of the building itself.

I take the preliminary measurements, sending TDS data-load to the geodome at regular intervals. I walk through the empty cavern of the temple, looking for impact marks, signs of wear, inscriptions, smoke smudge, water damage, traces of pigment. I record my impressions as I go. I'll add them to my first notes and organise them when I get back to the dome.

At the entrance to the cavernous hall, I find an inscription engraved in the stone. Curious. I didn't notice it on my first walk-around. Perhaps it's only visible under certain conditions. I photograph it: the text, the scribing surface, and its placement. Sometimes where an inscription is located speaks louder than the text itself: *Non omnis moriar* or *Arbeit macht frei*.

I run my fingers over the incisions. Are they new laws, the edicts of some divinity, the self-laudatory record of the master of the works? The lettering is still sharp, though the place sleeps in ancient abandonment. At some point, the chiselled text was painted red, and faded paint still shows in the deepest crevasses of the letters, like a scar. The alien alphabet reminds me vaguely of hieroglyphics. Stretched hieroglyphics. Beautiful, but



cultuRecom

meaningless. I need only find my own Rosetta stone. And become Champollion.

The echo of my laughter comes back to me as a lonely snort. Some sort of bird is singing in the broken space where the roof once was. This will be a good site to work.

I tell myself not to pace. Particularly as, in a three-square geodome, there's no room. Still, I'm managing to wear a track from cot to desk and back. From the pool of light isolating my handscreen on the long table, past the TDS and comms mobile, and on to the narrow comfort of the cot, it's all of four steps. But it's still pacing.

My fault or not, the screw-up on DP-Prime stuck to me. And as much as I had nothing to do with the massacre on Eli Lamii, it was my name that the Threads picked up. Sure, cultuRecon knows I wasn't responsible, and down the line, Gyorg does too. It'd be hard to work for him if he didn't. But failure has a strong odour, it clings to your clothes. Enter a room after spending time with it, and people sidle away, their noses wrinkling.

Some of the analysis will be tricky handling solo, but at least I won't have to worry about other people's baggage. Or politics. Jealousy. Or war.

I haven't located a quarry for the temple yet. Strange. Even though the dressed white stone is unlike the friable rock under the settlement, the quarry can't be far. The settlement is small, with no evidence of technology adequate to move large blocks of stone long distances. Maybe it was filled in. Or perhaps the settlement is older than I think. After enough time, excavations can escape a satellite lens. Accurate dating has been difficult, and the dust here is certainly persistent. Perhaps two races built it, a servant race, and another, the ones responsible for the mind-bending mathematics of its incredible architecture.

I know better than to touch anything, but I can't help but brush an ungloved hand against the walls as I leave at night. What could my fingers do to its impregnable grandeur? The temple is magnificent.

I've been working up some equations from the Total Data Station readings. Even with the help of TDS, $y(x) = K \cdot ch(C3 \cdot x)$ is the best I've come up with so far for the arches. And it's a crude approximation. I wish I could walk through these numbers with Mel.

How long did it take us on Porrentruy to work out that peculiar symbiosis of dormancy and feeding? Ten standard days,

non-stop, sleeping in turn, feeding every scrap of data into a jerry-rigged Massive. Nothing like avoiding being something's dinner to spur you on. And we cracked it. That algorithm rolled up the screen and we were grinning like idiots and slapping each other on the back.

I stop, arrested by the sudden memory of Mel's hands in the el-Lamian vice. I cover my eyes, but she's still hanging in front of me, blood seeping down her forearms. I kick the cot and it collapses. Why didn't she just stick to the work?

I must be more careful. My initial measurements are incorrect. In my first TDS readings, I measured the arches to calculate whether they were as well made as my eye said they were. Yesterday, I re-measured them. They are almost thirty-seven centimetres longer than I had originally calculated. How could I have made such an error? And yet, the calculations that I made of the shape of the arches, the catenary formula, are correct. I've checked and rechecked the transit. The instruments are fine.

It is as if, overnight, thirty-seven centimetres of dressed stone grew out from the shattered ends of the arches.

The alien building reminds me, in feeling if not in form, of a medieval monastery. And this is what puzzles me. There is no formal similarity. The terraces that surround the building are clearly not, and never have been, gardens, or places for silent contemplation and prayer. These soaring arches owe nothing to the stolid half-circles of the cloisters of Terran monks. If anything, I should be reminded of Gaudi. But I'm not. It's not like me to let fancy imprint the evidence of my senses. Why this feeling of familiarity?

Gellia would laugh. She always said I was unable to analyse even the simplest of feelings. "Only your work is real for you." Perhaps she was right. But it matters little, for I'm no longer accountable to Gellia. In fact, this is the first time in almost a year I've thought of her. But I am answerable to cultuRecon, and I can't give Gyorg a report which I know is complete, but which feels to me partial. I want to have something for him by next synch-loop.

I've retreated to the dome, though it doesn't offer much shelter. Hard to fathom any race living in this heat. But even in ruins, the cool of the temple is delicious. Perhaps that's the secret of the huddle of houses

around the massive building.

Or perhaps, like me, the inhabitants of the place worshipped the perfection of calculation. Even with its gaping ceiling, I admire its aura of inviolable strength. If the temple were whole, it could stand in sublime perfection, and need no worshippers.

I call up the floor plan of the structure on the handscreen. Horizontal and vertical axes of the building mimic each other. Shaped like a zero pointed at both ends, it stretches to north and south. And it rises as if it were tipped like an egg into the soil, the arches stretching toward the sky.

Every time I look at the plan I have drawn, I have the unshakeable conviction that something eludes me. But what? I walk through the space, experience with my feet and eyes what I believe is here, what I know is here. I walk through the middle of the building, turning to pace down one bowing side and up the next. Even shattered by who knows what cataclysm, the form is perfect, elegant and complete at once.

I walk out onto the eastern terrace. Bright light bleaches my handscreen. I fiddle with the controls until I render the thick black lines visible again. The plan rotating on the screen mimics precisely the temple and terraces I have paced out.

There's an invitation here, a call. I answer the only way I know how. I send another packet through the handheld to the TDS.

At second moonrise, handscreen ready, I walk through the hall under one full moon and one gibbous. The double moonlight drenches the pillars in bone-white light. One hand flat against a pillar, I can feel the folded stone within. What alien technology created this? Until I am sure, I will not give the all-clear to the surface team. Even abandoned gods, and truant worshippers, have unpleasant secrets.

While examining the ribs of the temple, I'm reminded suddenly of a VR tour I took when I was student on Kilik Segund. It was a walk-through of the Thoronet abbey on old Terra. Its lines were so simple, the stonework abrupt and compelling, a rare combination of utility and majesty. I was fascinated – and I was a callous young know-it-all then – and later I dug out that architect's account of the abbey's construction. What was his name? Bouillon? Poulon? Something like that.

The Cistercians went where nature was wildest, away from the cities, and worked together. Like wasps building a nest from

mud, they built up a cloister.

I stop pacing and squint into the shadow around me. Arch follows arch follows arch; steeped hands cup me, lost here in a forest of pillars.

What does this building want of me?

I couldn't sleep last night. Probably the heat. I got up and turned on the desk lamp, the geodome's only light. I sat and calculated shearing force and core sample compression, matching hypothesis to observation. The temple plan, its secret still elusive, rotated on my handscreen. After a while, I started pacing again. On my twentieth circuit, I sagged into the jumble of my cot and stared at the pool of light over my work. At the edges of its circle of light were a scatter of rock sample and a slide of smoke smudge. Memories of Gellia ambushed me.

Gellia.

Her hands always smelled of something - freshly crushed garlic, mountain sage, old leather. Mornings would leave the trace of her caress on my skin. I don't know. In the end, when I left for the five T-years duty I had signed on for at cultuRecon, an echo of cinnamon filmed my cheeks where her two hands had stroked them and then slid away.

I was in Eli Lamii when she communicated that I had given her a daughter, and when I could not find words to say how I felt, I heard no more from her. The child would be seven now. I wonder if she looks like me. I hope for the girl's sake she looks like her mother.

I will not think of her again. I have work to do.

This morning I walked through the settlement to its outer edge. Cloying dust leached the breath from my throat. Odd, I remember the town as much larger, more sprawling, on my first walk-through. And where is the graffiti? I was sure I saw some my first trip down, but now I can't find any of the stretched hieroglyphics.

And why would five hundred beings settle here in the first place? Nothing grows here, nothing has ever grown here, nothing but rock.

I have taken to sitting in the temple, trying to piece together the mystery of its collapse. The catenary arches are near perfect, and the pillars have an internal structure of folded reinforcement resistant to shearing. It's unique, unlike anything I've seen before. It's as if within the columns, the stone has folded itself up like corrugated cardboard. Solid,

secure, unassailable. There is no engineering fault, no architectural reason for this temple to be open to the skies. And according to the orbital seismic telemetry Gyorg sent, no geological reason either. Even if the devout have decamped, the stone should've held. So was there war? There's no sign of it.

And where's the stone that fell from the ceilings? Some has been used in the village, although I can't comprehend why. Who would take the stone away and build those squat dwellings? With that fallen stone, I would complete this work.

Gyorg's latest transmission was incomprehensible. I couldn't decipher it. It was like an alien language. Probably a compression problem. I've patched transmission through to my handheld. I'll try to get the ship live on the next loop.

The birds twitter above me. I still haven't seen one at close quarters.

It was hot again today. It was hot yesterday and it'll be hot tomorrow. Only the arches cast shadow. Earlier today, overcome by the heat, I laid down in the temple hall, eager for the relief the stone gives. Under my face and outstretched arms the blocks were magnificently cool. Prostrate, I listened to the birds - which I'm calling swallows though I'm sure they're not - chatter and weave above me as they sought the safety of their nests. I must have fallen asleep.

I felt the birds enter their nests.

I don't mean that I heard their muted chirps, or felt the air empty of their hunting swoops.

No. I felt the whirr of wings against my body, a plump down squeezing against my cold solidity. Unbroken stone breached by spike of beak, imperceptible breath and beat of heart. I awoke with a start, slapping at my chest, convinced that swallows would fly out of me.

Outside, the sun had fallen midway to the horizon.

A dream, a strange one, or a touch of sunstroke.

I couldn't put it off any longer. I sent in my preliminary report. I tried to make it clear to Gyorg that while there seems to be no threat here, there is mystery, one I have not yet run to ground. He has given me more time. Was it hesitation I heard in his voice? I think he still trusts my judgement. This is the first time, though, that I've asked him to trust my instincts. As I cross the empty

plain, skirling vortices of grit punctuate the moaning wind's long monotone.

As I was leaving the temple this evening, I noticed a formula inscribed in the stone just outside the massive bivalve doors: $(1) y'(x)=dy/dx=C2*mlg/C1+C2*mwy/C1$. I was struck with an overpowering sense of *déjà lu*. Back in the dome, I open my notes, and there's my own little ditty for the column fill, that strange corrugated stone, the formula that I worked out after I finished the one for the arches. How could I have missed the inscription the first time? Wasn't there something else there? I can't recall. In any event, the temple's formula is an improvement on mine. Like working with Mel, but better.

I've left the geodome. The scant dozen dwellings of the settlement watched mutely as I shuffled at dawn through the stone-dumb alley. I left behind the cot, the table, and the rest of my instruments, although I still have the handheld. I don't entirely trust the relay from the comms unit so there's a chance I might miss Gyorg's transmission, but it's worth it to be close to this. In the temple's cool emptiness, I can feel the stone speaking to me. It's so much easier to think. The mathematical perfection of the arches fills me with awe. I dream of them unbroken.

Who could have thought sleeping on stone could be a delight? The heat is nothing to me now. I lie on my back and watch the moons bathe the arches where they meet. I feel in my bones the long, slow congress of stone.

Behind the tight vacuum seal of the dome's flaps, my handheld, the TDS and the comms module sit mute. The TDS is too crude to calculate the sublime mathematics of this delicate ribcage.

On my hardening flesh is written: $y(x)=K^*ch(C3*x)$ and then these alien symbols I do not understand: *gyorg eli lamii gellia...* Beautiful, but meaningless. Through the narrowing gap in the vault, I watch the constellations spin.

My mouth is calcium. Skin puckers against cool night stone. Stone fingers steeple. The work goes on until our vaulting is complete. I am taken in. Inch by inch, the stars disappear. The darkness is perfect. □

In a season of cracking adaptations bookended by *A Scanner Darkly* and *The Prestige*, Alfonso Cuarón's **Children of Men** can at least claim to have made by far the biggest film from by far the worst novel. Back in 1992, when P.D. James's limp fable of a world gone sterile originally appeared, Dame Phyllis triumphantly alienated the entire of community at a stroke by snootily deprecating the science fiction label for a novel which had itself been immediately fingered as an amateurish and vastly inferior knockoff of Brian Aldiss's 1964 classic *Greybeard* (with which it even shares much of its Oxford and Thames valley setting). Incoherently thought out and startlingly ineptly plotted, it remains to this day a cautionary demonstration of why people who feel disdain for sf should never attempt to write it, and would certainly never have seen daylight, far-less a high-budget film adaptation, but for its author's reputation in her native genre.

Cuarón and four further writers have had their work cut out to extract any kind of filmable story from the material, and the good news is that most of the novel, which might generously be described as an atmosphere piece, has been ditched. The less good news is that they haven't been able to come up with anything terribly compelling to put in its place, particularly by way of an ending. The novel at least made an attempt at resolving the political storyline of resistance to a thuggish and sclerotic oligarchy, though by the laughably clumsy device of the head of state coming to oversee the ending personally and his place being taken by our hero after the inevitable shootout, apparently without anyone particularly minding. The film version falls back on the still more desperate device of a shadowy organisation of scientists riding the oceans beyond the reach of nation states, so that the quest now becomes to deliver them the first new mother and child following decades of universal infertility, apparently leaving the mainland to collapse into anarchy behind them. This does make for a plot with some sense of destination, in place of the novel's wearisome chase in ever-decreasing circles around the Oxfordshire countryside. But it's far too weak and ad hoc a solution to satisfy as an ending, and its *ex machina* artificiality undermines the otherwise commendable attempt at a gritty, brutal realism. Ironically,



the one commendably nasty Jamesian touch in the novel, the hero's loss of his daughter by backing the car over her, has been squeamishly sanitised out of the film, presumably as contravening the holy law of heroic identification.

All that said, Cuarón is an amazing resourceful director who couldn't make a duff film if he had to, and what redeems *Children of Men* from sterility is its potent cinematic update of the classic British post-apocalypse yarn in which "The World Has Collapsed," (as a newscast title in the opening minutes tells us), and "Only Britain Soldiers On." This deepest-rooted of all homegrown sf mythologies has been impressively remoulded for the age of terror, with visceral sequences of a Baghdadised London and internment camps under the law of the gun, all artfully offset against pastoral scenes of middle-class farmhouse living as the last crumbling retreats of order and decency. Cuarón's long-trained outsider eye – all four of his Anglophone films have come from British literary sources – is ideal for the film version's arc of a journey into the heart of the immigrant experience, with a distinctively Latin and defamiliarising Catholic colouring that at the climax has squaddies crossing themselves at the sight of the new madonna. If the script doesn't entirely hold up, it's still a welcome addition to a great British sf film tradition most recently revived in *28 Days Later* and *Reign of Fire*, and even *Brazil* is rarely far away. All in all, it manages to work something near a miracle of resurrection on its lifeless source; but just think what it could have done with the same amount of money spent on Aldiss.

The same point is brought home from the other side of the divide by *Brothers of the Head*, deftly adapted by Terry Gilliam's regular co-writer Tony Groot from Aldiss's 1972 novel about cerebral popstar abby. A film that revels in its specific lack of any discernible budget, it tracks the book quite closely aside from the ruthless elimination of anything that threatens to cost actual money, including all the elements. The most drastic casualty here is the actual Head, the vestigial third sibling whose awakening is the driving climax to the Aldiss version, but Gilliam reduced you still more cogitally embedded Extro to brother Harry's brain that then disappears from the story as soon as it's introduced. Groot, too, are the gorgons of dreams and lyrics that light up the original, and the entire career has been scaled drastically down from an expansive succession of acclaimed albums and global tours to the recording of a single album over a few months in a country-house studio with a handful of polyphonic divas.

All this sounds severe, but the more intricate narrative finds actually tightens the literary will for film, and quite a lot of the feel of the book has been lovingly retained, albeit with some clever re-arrangement of the original chronology. Aldiss's story begins in the early 1980s, and told in a collage of the characters' voices from around the middle of the decade. This gave him freedom to imagine the rock music of the mid-seventies developing in a direction, especially a lyrical direction, that suited the story without claiming any correspondence to current and future musical development, which indeed were going off on a different and

MUTANT POPCORN NICK LOWE

unforeseeable trajectory at the remarkable moment of writing. The film has dealt with this by repositioning the action very specifically in mid-1975 and making the brothers the unknowing inventors of what in our reality became punk, while shifting the point of narration to the present day and recreating the novel's mix of voices in the form of a documentary about that moment as seen from now.

It's an ingenious way to acknowledge both the actual pop history of the decades since the novel and the deeper historical perspective that a generation's distance makes. The documentary techniques of both eras are lovingly pastiched, as is Clive Langer's joyously authentic period music, and the casting and performances are often brilliant, with Harry and Luke Treadaway fleshing out the twins' contrasting personalities vividly and convincingly. For then-and-now versions of the same characters a combination of special makeup and spot-on double-casting has been so deftly deployed that you actually can't tell when you're watching the same actor in very good makeup or two very well cast different actors. Viewers should be warned here about an alarming moment in the first talking-heads sequence where we see first Ken Russell (from whose unfinished contemporary documentary the footage professes to be drawn) and then Aldiss himself, the latter so unrecognisable that the first thought is that he's suffered some ghastly illness – only for the end credits to reveal that it wasn't the real Aldiss at all but an actor who looks nothing like him. It's that kind of film.





Brothers comes close on the heels of Grisoni's work on another low-budgeted edge-of-genre adaptation, Terry Gilliam's screen version of Mitch Cullin's novel **Tideland**. Like *Children of Men*, this is a fantastically well-made film whose principal weakness is that the source novel, which it follows extremely closely, just isn't a terribly good specimen of its kind. The southern-gothic romp with child narrator is a fairly well-worn novelistic type, done best (for my money) in Lynda Barry's *Cruddy*. But you can see exactly what attracted Gilliam to Cullin's particular rural-Texan fantasy of an eleven-year-old girl's traceover of Alice's adventures with the help of a junkie dad, guerrilla taxidermist neighbour, retarded child-man playmate, and entourage of talking Barbie heads. In cheekily sending Gilliam the novel unsolicited in the first place, Cullin clearly twigged that it would needle straight into the director's exposed vein of obsession with children's escape into creative worldmaking, and one of the genuine delights of the film, especially on the back of the grim *Brothers Grimm*, is to see Gilliam enjoying himself so much with his material. But the heroine's very centrality to the novel creates problems for the film. The first half hour is riotous, exhilarating black comedy, with Jeff Bridges's junk-addled dad generating a rich stream of gleefully horrible gags. But all too soon both parents are removed from the action, leaving Jodelle Ferland's heroine literally alone with her fantasies in the middle of empty grassland; and the arrival of an all-new cast and storyline never quite recovers from the loss of both star comedy and narrative momentum, despite some fine moments of monstrous overacting from Janet McTeer and a Dourif-esque Brendan Fletcher with a slew of great lines about brains ("I'd like a new brain sometime because I think a new one is shiny," &c.).

For such a modest film, *Tideland* has had a surprisingly hostile landing, causing offence in equal measure by its casual child involvement with drug use,

its sexual interaction between child and adult performers, and its near-total lack of plot. These seem quite the wrong things to be bothered by, and if anyone's at fault it's Cullin, not Gilliam, who has done no more than reproduce faithfully what's there on the page. Indeed, the rather low-level sexual interaction between Ferland and Fletcher has been further toned down in the film version, and it's hard to imagine the excellent Ferland (best known now from *Silent Hill*) being more corrupted by anything she has to do for the camera than she already has been by having been a Hollywood performer from the age of five. One of the small disappointments, in fact, is how politely some of the edgier material is handled – something rather encapsulated in an improbable graffito on the family wall that reads "fuckin' shithole" (solemn apostrophe *sic*). The one really

chilling thing is the effect on Gilliam, who's now prefaced the UK prints with a hideously misjudged and genuinely scary preemptive personal statement: "...I was sixty-four years old when I made this movie. I think I've finally discovered the child within me. It turned out to be a little girl." It's more than a little ironic here that both Cullin and Gilliam independently found the key inspiration for their aging fantasies of childhood in Andrew Wyeth's *Christina's World* – evidently unaware, like most American households who stick it up in their living room, that the real Christina is not a young girl on the edge of a dream but a fifty-year-old woman whose legs don't work and who hasn't got a wheelchair, and is looking at that house in the grim knowledge she's going to have to drag herself every inch of the way up the long, steep hill to reach it.



Fifteen years ago, on one of his periodic upswings of bankability, Gilliam tried and failed to get studio backing for a film of Philip K. Dick's **A Scanner Darkly** as his followup to *The Fisher King*. Others followed, with no more success; and even Richard Linklater has only managed to leverage a version through at last by trading on his late and unlikely emergence as a blockbuster hitmaker with *School of Rock*, and it's still taken Keanu working for scale to get the studio behind it. But bless them all, because this largely by-the-book adaptation does a lovely job of smoothing out awkwardnesses in plotting and plausibility and tighten a nut here and there to make it flow as a film narrative, while still trying its best to minimise damage to the integrity of Dick's text and concept. A lot of the hard work here was actually done by Charlie Kaufman in his unrealised 1997 draft, ghost images of which can be seen in several of Kaufman's own subsequent films (especially *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*), and which Linklater has quite patiently used as his starting point, though he's been understandably coy on the subject in interviews. But Linklater's own contribution has also been significant, tightening the cast with a couple of character merges and upgrading the twist about the identity of a central character to make for a more satisfying and elegant payoff without disrupting Dick's conception. It's Linklater, too, who's made the brave decision to give away at the outset the novel's revelation that rehab corporation New Path is also the organisation behind Substance D in the first place – recognising that any modern-day filmgoer will instantly assume that if there's a visible corporation then it's the agency behind the conspiracy, and that there's more than enough in the character arcs alone to sustain a satisfying finale.

Another personal project from a hitmaker cashing in his account balance, M. Night Shyamalan's derided **Lady in the Water** is everything it's been charged with being – a monumental vanity enterprise, incoherent and pointless, and so on – so that it's easy to lose sight of the fact that it's very well directed and played (even by the man himself, in a piece of vanity casting that's nevertheless attracted disproportionate opprobrium); has a great central idea in setting its action entirely in an apartment complex populated by a generous cast of fine character performers who gradually assemble into a big collaborative storyline; and deals as ever with the favourite Night theme of things lurking in the dark edges of the world. Needless to say, everything else about this soggy tale of an all-redeeming water princess from another world is complete rubbish, and an object lesson in why stuff you make up to put your daughters to sleep isn't the best bet to keep audiences awake; if it happened to work in *The Princess Bride*, that's in large part because it was filtered through the additional discipline of a novel. Nevertheless, the whole thing is so deeply unlike anything any sane person would dream up that it does have its own weird fascination, particularly in its bizarre postmodern apparatus of a mythology based entirely on the wonkier bits of Hollywood screenwriting doctrine – a heroine named after Bob McKee's egregious industry bible, an inordinately complex and arbitrary role-based theory of plot. The directorial trademarks are all there – the manipulative atmospherics, the skilfully overblown beats – and if Shyamalan the writer chooses this moment to exercise his hard-earned right to go completely la-la and self-destruct in public, at least his other head is still functioning. It'll be interesting to see which is dominant on his next gig.



There are, of course, some subtle costs in all this. The point of Dick's famous afterword, reproduced in the film, was that the tragedy of his generation of substance abusers was that the ultimate villain was their own desire to play – *not* some Hollywood corporate baddie using rehab labour to push out the product in the first place. Similarly, the unenviable decision as to which of Dick's great stoned dialogue scenes to retain has been made by ranking them as showcases for the supporting ensemble. So where Kaufman's script retained in full the magnificent microdot routine from the novel, surely the single funniest sequence Dick ever wrote, Linklater has reluctantly ditched it in favour of the bicycle-gears scene – but has bizarrely eliminated the punchline that gave the scene its entire point, and it's hard to see how a film audience can be expected to figure it out from what they're given. But these weaknesses are offset by Linklater's remarkable directorial contribution, in the digital-rotoscoping technique he pioneered in *Waking Life*, which blurs the boundary between the real and the cartoon universes in ways that very aptly echo the great Dickian themes. It's a fascinating technique, not least for the subversive ways in which it trains you to watch actors. Even in his scramble suit (in whose first appearance I'm pretty sure you catch a subliminal image of PKD, but we'll need to wait for the DVD to check), Keanu's distinctive body language is recognisable as him, not a standin; and Linklater's revelation that one of the other scramblers is also a famous face is actually detectable in advance, perhaps deliberately, from the way the suit animation is traced over a distinctive facial structure. If it feels just a little bit too tidy for the Dick of 1974-7, it's still a film of which you can truthfully say that it changes the way you watch cinema.

In a season of unseasonable darkness, the biggest surprise is that the darkest film of the crop is an Adam Sandler comedy. **Click** introduces itself ingenuously as a warm-hearted fantasy of midlife crisis in the tradition of Harold Ramis's *Groundhog Day* and *Multiplicity*, centred on the ultimate plot device of a universal remote that allows its hero to remote his universe: to fast-forward, pause, mute, adjust colour and aspect, access commentary, chapter marks, and making-of featurettes...well, you can prop your own on the desk and scene-card the set pieces for yourself. But in octuple-quick scantime its bright comedic colours mute into something a good deal chillier, as the plot controller learns its user's behaviour and starts to recognise situations which have previously been injudiciously skipped through, and Adam finds himself propelled through his life at an ever-accelerating pace. Obviously there's a moral here about not accepting electrical goods from guys called "Morty" played by Christopher Walken in scary hair and glasses made from springs. But the real point, which the film doesn't flinch from spelling out, is that adult life does this stuff to you without any help from demonic lifestyle accessories, and if you don't hit Downshift right now you'll be doomed to autoffwd straight to the grave.

There are a lot of obvious things wrong with *Click*, including an uncomfortable streak of gross body humour, some of the strangest age makeup ever seen, and a colossal hole in the plotting that could easily have been repaired with a single line of dialogue. (Just why, given it's the first thing the audience thinks of, does he never once in his life think of pressing rewind?) But the general unfunniness if anything strengthens the film, whose sheer relentlessness in the punishment of its hero for his original sin of putting work before family makes the whole experience genuinely painful to watch in a way that can't be quite what its makers intended. Like both *Children of Men* and *Lady in the Water*, it ends with a personal dedication to the director's kids – and, this being an unabashedly and rather effectively Jewish take on the midlife and the familial, to his mom and dad as well. Aldiss wrote *Greybeard* out of one such moment in his own middle life, and in its grim, nigh-unwatchable way this failed comedy of lost hope has something of the same emotional root. It's hard to imagine anyone wanting to see it; but the same could be said of the future. **Nick Lowe**

Hunters of Dune

Herbert & Anderson • Hodder, 524pp, £19.99 hb

A cloaked spaceship carries a disparate band of refugees from the planet Chapterhouse. Among them are the last loyal servants of House Atreides, a handful of Bene Gesserit Reverend Mothers, and six young sandworms stashed in the hold. They are fleeing from an unknown yet deadly persistent Enemy, which chased them into a different universe where they now drift, searching for a path forward or a place to rest.

Meanwhile, back on Chapterhouse, the Mother-Commander of the New Sisterhood is preparing for the arrival of that very same mysterious Enemy. Murbella is trying to hold together a fragile alliance of the previously opposed Bene Gesserits and Honored Matres, two mystic matriarchal organisations with deadly mental powers, seduction techniques and fighting skills.

Behind the scenes, the secretive shape-shifting Face Dancers are pulling strings, replacing the key figures of organisations with their own disguised operatives, working toward their own apocalyptic agenda, and advancing the final battle for the galaxy. As alliances are forged and shattered, deals and double-crossings committed and machinations played out, all these factions and more are drawn into a maelstrom of intrigue and conflict, against the backdrop of the steady advance of the unidentified Enemy.

Hunters of Dune is a thick book. It is also the first half of a pair; with the forthcoming *Sandworms of Dune* it is intended to be the final end-cap to the vast story arcs of the Dune universe. The synopsis above (which is a mere sliver of the state of play at the book's beginning) provides some indication of the difficulty of writing such a novel – the sheer weight of back-story means that it takes well over a hundred pages for Herbert and Anderson to introduce all the main characters and groups, and start their storylines.

The plot is huge, intricate and convoluted, spanning the events of two decades – and as such a certain rapidity of storytelling is required, simply to cover all the ground. The end result is a book that would probably be either an uphill struggle or completely

opaque to a reader with no prior experience of the Dune universe – especially due to a number of the main characters being cloned reincarnations of figures from the earlier works. This produces a certain degree of inescapable info-dumping, as character histories are exposed in brief chunks. It also means that, by necessity, the book is a little thin on detail. However, the mass of history almost becomes a minor theme in itself – as Duncan Idaho says (page 158), “One of [Leto II's] most prominent lessons was that humanity should learn to think on a truly large timescale.”

Slight on incidentals the writing may be, but that means sheer pace of plot can take the foreground. The Dune books have always dealt with a wide range of human themes – faith, religion, destiny and prophecy all run through the story like veins of ore beneath the surface. It is regrettable that they are not mined more thoroughly, though that would have added further bulk to an already immense tome. The more sfnal ideas in the work (cloning, artificial intelligence, interstellar travel) are convenient plot tools rather than the focus of the narrative. Indeed, the Dune stories have always had a somewhat ‘science fantasy’ feel to them, in that the plots could be easily displaced into well-realised fantastic or historical milieus without a great degree of alteration. Hard sf, they are not.

But hard sf was never the intent of

Frank Herbert's original novels, nor their successors. The core sequence, while exciting and adventurous, were always very focused on the interactions of characters, using the various fictional factions as avatars for real-world religions, philosophies and ideologies, then playing them off against each other. Brian Herbert and Kevin Anderson have made a conscious decision to step away from Frank's style of writing in favour of the action-driven mode that they espouse. While this produces a novel that will hold its own against its competitors in the modern market, it means that the absence of the magic of the earlier works can be felt, not to mention that of Frank Herbert's baroque and intricate writing style. This will doubtless be of little concern to avid followers of the now-sprawling franchise, who have been eagerly anticipating this book for some time. They demand the continuation of the story; *Hunters of Dune* delivers.

Of course, the debt of invention it owes to the original works is inescapable. The judgement of whether it truly matches up to the promise of a satisfactory ending to one of the best-known sf stories of all time is best left to those closest to the franchise in terms of hunger for its completion. And while it's unlikely to eclipse the reputation for sheer invention and majesty held by Frank Herbert's original novels, its success is nevertheless an absolute certainty.



DUNE 7: BRIAN HERBERT & KEVIN J. ANDERSON

KEVIN J. ANDERSON

Kevin J. Anderson is a science fiction writer, best known for his Dune novels and his epic space opera, *Saga of Seven Suns*.

I am a writer, but I'm also a fan. I get a great deal of pleasure from working in, and creating more pieces of, some of the universes that I enjoy as a fan. On the other hand, I enjoy the freedom of creating my own worlds and stories, unhindered by past episodes/movies and approval committees. I'm very proud of my *Saga of Seven Suns* epic, which brings together all I love about the genre.

What attracted you to the Dune project?
Dune is very special to me. Writing the prequel novels – and now the sequels that Frank Herbert intended to write – is a dream come true. I am captivated by the planets, the people, the politics, the epic canvas of the stories.

Every decade or so, *Dune* seems to be freshly relevant all over again. It can be read as a metaphor for oil shortages and

the politics of petroleum. It can be read as a warning of ecological catastrophe and how forced changes to the environment can lead to great climatic consequences. It can be read as a story about religious fanatics following a charismatic leader. Or it can be read as a great adventure story.

Can you tell us about the Dune 7 manuscript you found?

We found the keys to an old safe deposit box Frank had rented, and it contained old floppy disks and dot-matrix printouts of his outline and notes for *Dune 7*. That was really like discovering hidden treasure. Brian then went through all of his father's boxes of manuscripts and papers stored in his attic, and he found more than a thousand pages of additional notes about *Dune* history and characters.

Frank's outline gave us the direction and a road map for where the story was going, many of the twists and turns and major

plot revelations. Having a map in hand is quite different from taking a full-fledged trip, however. Even though we knew where the story had to go, Brian and I still have a great deal of work to do.

How do you feel about the new Dune novels?

I think that a lot of the major sf novels currently being released are incomprehensible to the average reader. They are dense, full of jargon, intimately self-referential to the genre. Don't get me wrong, these are some of the best works in current sf. Alastair Reynolds, Peter Hamilton, John Meaney – all are fabulous and imaginative writers, but the average man on the street can't get through the first chapter without drowning in unfamiliar words and concepts. Epic fantasy, on the other hand, is immediately accessible.

But in other media outlets, sf is doing just fine. Look at all the TV shows, for instance; sf far outnumbers fantasy.

BRIAN HERBERT

How did you become involved in the Dune project?

I needed to commit myself to the immense undertaking of writing the novels. My mother and father were a writing team, and after they died I thought that the series should end with the wonderful tribute that Dad wrote for her at the conclusion of *Chapterhouse: Dune*. Then I met Kevin J. Anderson, and everything changed. The two of us found that we had an incredible energy and enthusiasm for the series, and soon we were brainstorming, coming up with exciting new story ideas and breathing new life into the series.

We needed to figure out the answer to the mystery at the end of *Chapterhouse: Dune*, concerning what terrible, mysterious force was chasing the ferocious Honored Matres across the universe. When we talked about continuing the series, we made many educated guesses about the mystery. It was solved conclusively,

however, when two safety deposit boxes belonging to my father turned up in the handling of the estate, more than eleven years after his death. Inside them we found several old style computer disks, including one marked DUNE 7 NOTES in Frank Herbert's handwriting. It turned out to be essential information.

I knew we couldn't tackle the *Dune 7* novels until we really did our homework. I had already done extensive research into the Dune universe, and after that I prepared a detailed concordance of all six *Dune* novels that my father wrote, so that I knew all of the structural details of the series.

Can you tell us about the research you did for the Dune novels?

Kevin and I realised that we needed to use a slightly different style from the one that Frank Herbert used, particularly in his last three novels. In those books, his characters had numerous deeply intellectual

conversations among themselves about politics, religion, philosophy, history; some of the major action occurred in the background. Kevin and I realised that we needed to go back to the style of the first novel *Dune*, a great, action-filled adventure story. The writing style that was more comfortable for us, and we felt it would be more likely to encourage new readers to pick up the series.

When we began writing, we were amazed to discover that we still had our original enthusiasm for the series, even after producing more than 1,000,000 words together.

We soon realised that we needed to write these two books for the most demanding and critical of *Dune* fans. In focusing on this core fan group, Kevin and I reached deeper than ever before, spent more time in our studies than ever, and made more apologies to our respective wives for not being able to spend much time with them.

REVIEW & INTERVIEWS BY PAUL RAVEN

Blindsight

Peter Watts • Tor, 384pp, \$25.95 hb

Over the last few years, the Canadian writer Peter Watts has made a distinctive name for himself in the sequence of novels beginning with *Starfish*. Those books showcased his narrative skill, his scientific acumen (he's a marine biologist by training) and perhaps most of all a distinctively driven pessimism. His books tend to be populated by characters whose personalities are more damaged than most of us will find comfortable, and yet who can seem sane and even humane compared to the world they move through.

All of those qualities are on show again in *Blindsight*, a standalone novel that's at least initially couched as a First Contact tale. A group of handpicked misanthropes (including a real-no-kidding-scientifically-justified-vampire) have set off in the ship *Theseus* to investigate a mysterious alien artefact. As readers of books from Budrys's *Rogue Moon* onwards may guess, it's not totally friendly, and the plot of the book is chewily complicated.

But the real core of the book are Watts's speculations about human nature, as embodied in his lead characters. Siri Keeton, for instance, has had a chunk of his brain removed to deal with epilepsy; Amanda Bates, another of the explorers and *Theseus*'s weapons officer, is welded into an exoskeleton. Whereas other sf authors might want to make you see what these alterations look like, or understand how they came about, Watts is most concerned to make you *feel* like his characters – an experience of sometimes uncomfortable intensity.

Blindsight scores over Watts's earlier books – and, indeed, most sf around these days – in its narrative drive, the sustained urgency of its telling. It's a dense but astonishingly readable book. Watts's tendency to jump around and provide multiple perspectives on the shape of the world is under control here, and his flashbacks to Earth are always relevant to the larger story. I can understand why Watts's work can be strong medicine for some; but for me he's one of the two or three best hard sf writers around, and this is his finest book to date. **Graham Sleight**

The Exile Kiss

George Alec Effinger • Orb, 320pp, \$14.95 pb

This is the third of George Alec Effinger's novels about Marid Audran, half Berber half French, a small-time finder and fixer who has become, much to his own surprise, right-hand man to the powerful Friedlander Bey (Papa), watching over his many interests in the Budayeen. Effinger's trilogy (the earlier volumes are *When Gravity Fails* and *A Fire in the Sun*) is often described as being 'cyberpunk'. However, his stories are not as overtly preoccupied with appearance and technology as Gibson's early novels. The familiar tropes of body and brain modification persist, but more as an unremarkable part of everyday life. Not everyone has them, not everyone wants them. Audran reluctantly receives a brain implant in the first novel, and begins to employ personality modules and information add-ons as part of his work, but with some caution. However, on the whole, Effinger's characters show little sign of faddish enslavement to the latest cultural fashion. Instead, they are driven by more old-fashioned appetites: lust, greed, and the desire for power.

In the first two novels Audran rarely travelled away from the familiar streets of the Budayeen, the Arab ghetto that Effinger brings to bustling life, but *The Exile Kiss* opens with Audran and his boss being 'exiled' for a murder they did not commit, 'exiled' being a legal euphemism for their being dumped far out in the Empty Quarter of the desert and then left to perish. There seems to be little in common between the desert and the ghetto, but Audran applies the lessons he learns among the Bedu who rescue him and Papa, as he attempts to flush out the real murderer, and find the person who framed them. His experiences in the desert transform Audran in other ways. His social conscience has already been awakened and he has begun to re-adopt the Muslim practices he abandoned as a young man. Here, however, Effinger skilfully depicts his growing awareness of his responsibilities to others, particularly to the growing 'family' of dependents that his new position brings with it. In the end, it is the portrait of Marid Audran, coming to terms with himself and his culture, that stays with the reader, that and Effinger's vivid creation of a future society whose very ordinariness is what makes it seem so plausible. **Maureen Kincaid Speller**

The Exile Kiss

GEORGE ALEC EFFINGER

H.I.V.E

Mark Walden • Bloomsbury, 298pp, £12.99 hb

H.I.V.E. is the debut novel of Mark Walden, the latest author to join the crowded race for J.K. Rowling's throne. Walden may be new to the scene, but he certainly knows his market and, while *H.I.V.E.* utilizes a very familiar story 'formula', it is nevertheless a greatly entertaining book.

First things first: *H.I.V.E.* tells the story of Otto Malpense, who awakes at the beginning of the novel to find himself, along with one other boy, on a helicopter bound for parts unknown. It soon becomes clear that Malpense has been selected (and for selected read 'kidnapped') for a place in the top-secret island fortress of *H.I.V.E.*: The Higher Institute of Villainous Education.

A good sense of mystery is quickly developed as a number of character questions are thrown up: Walden chooses not to reveal a great deal about Otto's past straight off, deciding instead to let the reader wonder exactly what kind of boy he must be to end up in such malign company. Though he is certainly gifted and prone to

H.I.V.E. is a fast-paced, fun story with a touch of the macabre, a dash of the mysterious, and a healthy dose of the tragic. It's a book that's sure to keep you entertained and engaged from start to finish.

psychologically evaluate just about everyone he meets, it is by no means evident that Otto is a *bad* kid. His fellow students, Wing (Otto's co-captive in the opening scene), Laura, Shelby and Franz are equally mysterious, each possessing talents and pasts which surface throughout the novel, explaining their various angles in the story.

H.I.V.E. is essentially a set-up novel to establish a 'world', and the institute itself is handled very much like Hogwarts, with a selection of unique and memorable teachers to flesh out the background. Walden maintains just the right balance of characters to keep things running smoothly, and his flashback explaining Otto's own reason for selection is particularly entertaining. An unusual side plot involving Nigel Darkdoom, a boy who simply can't escape the shadow of his criminally adept father, offers a nice alternative for readers who think they're beginning to predict a climax for the novel's main protagonists.

H.I.V.E. obviously paves the way for a lengthy series, and there is enough here to persuade readers to return for Otto's second outing. **David Lee Stone**

Firefly: The Official Companion, Volume One

Bernstein, Cairns, Derrick & Di Lallo • Titan Books, 175pp, £16.99 pb



This is a much-anticipated TV series companion that will have *Firefly* fans everywhere floating blissfully in geek heaven. Organised around the shooting scripts for (sadly just) the first seven episodes, the main text is interspersed with interviews, costume development, and highly personal anecdotes from the actors (like Inara discussing orgasms on set). It's full colour and glossy with plenty of unpublished pictures; and you get official translations of all those Mandarin phrases and insults used by the crew. Watch the *Firefly* series and fall in love with its intelligence and wit. Read the companion book and love it all the more.

Sandy Auden

Promised Land

Jack Dann • PS Publishing, 243pp, £25 hb

It was Camelot, the Promised Land, when all the dreams of the future were about to come true. But JFK was assassinated, and Bobby Kennedy after him, Marilyn Monroe killed herself, James Dean smashed himself up in a fast car, and Elvis just got fat. The dreamers, and the ones who might make the dreams come true, were gone, and somehow America never really did live up to its promise. That golden age, from the mid-50s to the mid-60s, was a lost time.

But what if not all the dreamers were killed? What if, in particular, James Dean had lived, gone on to make bigger and better movies, and had eventually moved into politics as, in our world, Ronald Reagan did? That was the premise of Jack Dann's last novel, *The Rebel: An Imagined Life of James Dean*; now, as a pendant to that book, comes this collection of stories.

Although all have been published separately, none of these stories really stands alone, independent of the novel. There is no big picture revealed; few of the stories have much in the way of plot, and when they do they rarely reach a satisfactory conclusion; most, despite the sub-title, don't even occupy an alternative America identifiably different from our own. What they do is fill in odd gaps in the novel, or provide an additional or complementary view.

And if the dreamers had lived, would America have been that much better? From this collection it is impossible to tell, because Dann concentrates exclusively and at times pruriently on the sleazy underbelly of sex and drugs and booze. What is certain, though, is that Dann writes with an energy and spirit that sits well with a cast of characters including Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs. Just imagine if those old beat writers had lived to write contemporary alternate history science fiction. **Paul Kincaid**

H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life

Michel Houellebecq • Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 256pp, £10 pb

The title of this book is taken from its centrepiece, a 91-page essay casting new light on the work of author and subject alike. It also includes a brief but illuminating introduction by Stephen King; a timeline, translator's notes and bibliography; and two classic tales from Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos. These stories, 'The Call of Cthulhu' and 'The Whisperer in Darkness', are widely available elsewhere, but provide a handy point of reference for Houellebecq's reinterpretation of pulp fiction's answer to Edgar Allan Poe.

If, on first consideration, Michel Houellebecq's passion for the Cthulhu stories is surprising, then his sense of connection to Lovecraft himself is downright astonishing.

The sexually repressed Lovecraft was born in Rhode Island in 1890, the year of the murder of Chief Sitting Bull. He died in genteel poverty in 1937, with his work championed by a small but committed coterie of admirers.

Houellebecq, feted as the laureate of 21st century social breakdown, is a bestselling French author whose work has been translated into twenty-five languages but whose fame spreads way beyond the boundaries of his readership. His focus is the descent of affluent Western societies into an orgy of conspicuous consumption. This theme tends to be tackled in long passages of exorbitant, explicit and disturbing sexual imagery.

But there are compelling points of connection between these apparently disparate writers: bouts of depression;

grandparents who played an important role in their upbringing; reclusive existences; espousal of materialist atheism; and the creation of books with bleak, enigmatic narratives. And both writers have been classed as racist.

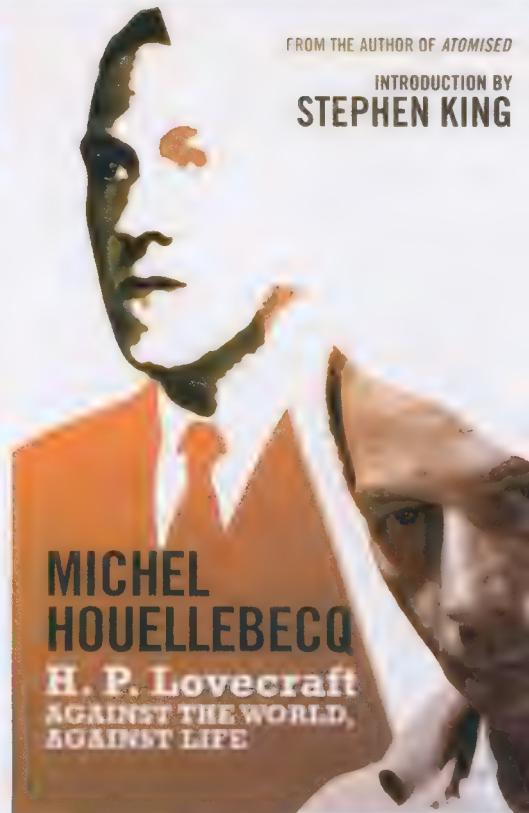
In 2002 Houellebecq was acquitted of a charge of inciting racial hatred after describing Islam as "the stupidest religion" in an interview in *Lire*, a French literary magazine. His defence was partly based on an assertion that the three main monotheistic religions were founded on scriptures that were "texts of hate."

But, Houellebecq tells us, Lovecraft's work really was informed by racial hatred. It began as an aspect of an insular and puritanical Protestant upbringing in New England but mutated into untrammelled neurosis when Lovecraft spent two unsuccessful and traumatic years in New York.

There's an unflinching honesty in Houellebecq's treatment of Lovecraft's loathing of the perceived physical vitality of Jews, Negroes and people of mixed race – and very uncomfortable reading it makes. There's no attempt to hide it, or to excuse it, but in linking Lovecraft's racism to the victim status of his educated, Anglo-Saxon protagonists a new insight is offered into a literary aesthetic based on resentment and disgust. It's a life-negating aesthetic with a repugnant provenance, but Houellebecq argues it offers a vital critique of the insipid and functional world we inhabit.

"The reach of liberal capitalism has extended over minds," he writes. "In step and hand in hand with it are mercantilism,

FROM THE AUTHOR OF ATOMISED

INTRODUCTION BY
STEPHEN KING

publicity, the absurd and sneering cult of economic efficiency, the exclusive and immoderate appetite for material riches."

Houellebecq suggests the atavistic terrors of Lovecraft's mythic landscape stand in opposition to a deadening psycho-economic landscape. This is an objective of Houellebecq's storytelling too.

This isn't a comfortable or congenial read. I wouldn't want to be in Lovecraft's skull or Houellebecq's – or even to spend any time with them. It is, however, a provocative and enlightening commentary on the work of two idiosyncratic and compelling storytellers. **Andy Hedgecock**

MORTALITY
Nicholas Royle • Serpent's Tail, 246pp, £8.99 pb



Mortality: the condition of being subject to death, but also, on the obverse side of the coin, that of being involved in life or the world.

Mortality: a collection of twenty short stories by Nicholas Royle, and published by Serpent's Tail (itself twenty years old this year), each of which examines an aspect of those inextricably linked definitions above, more often than not in the same story.

Royle wrote these stories over the period 1990 to 2006. The last, 'The Churring', is original to this collection, but the others have been gathered from an extraordinarily wide range of sources and

display an equally eclectic range of styles. Three of the earliest stories ('The Cast', 'Flying into Naples' and 'Negatives' first appeared in *Interzone* (issues 63, 77 and 35); 'Kingyo no fun' was first published in Poppy Z. Brite's 1977 anthology *Love in Vein II*, and a disturbing conflation of death, auto-eroticism and repressed childhood memories pervades 'The Comfort of Stranglers' (an appalling pun on the title of an Ian McEwan novel), re-collected from Stephen Jones and David Sutton's *Dark Terrors 2*. Other stories have appeared in places as diverse as *The Independent* (Avenue E, 01.01.00), *Time Out*, *Birmingham Noir*, *Technopagan*,

Tomes of the Dead: Death Hulk

Matthew Sprange • Abaddon, 276pp, £6.99 pb

Traditional zombie novels are surprisingly few and far between. Perhaps popular B movies have been enough for most or that such stories are perceived predictable and simplistic. *Tomes of the Dead* corrects any such assumption and *Death Hulk* is a suitable spearhead for these fresh tales of zombie action. Set in the Napoleonic Age, the surroundings are kept as background rather than weighing what is a perfectly paced narrative with too much historical detail, but there's enough information to visualise the harsh sailor life and the explosive ship battles which form the bulk of the action.



The story itself centres on the British Frigate *Whirlwind*, sent to bounty hunt the French frigate *Elita*. The mission turns to disaster when they discover that a curse on their Captain's lineage has brought back a long dead ship to exact revenge on all aboard the *Whirlwind*. The sea battles highlight much more intelligent and violent zombies than their stereotypes and I'm happy to report that there's an abundance of gore, especially in the no holds barred, climactic battle. Notable also is the gradual change in crew attitude from roaring patriotism to mutinous, which provides gripping depth to the story outside of the action. This is refreshing zombie fiction and on reading past *Death Hulk* there's an exciting teaser of the next *Tomes of the Dead* which I will be certainly looking out for. **Kevin Stone**

A BeSea #E, and Experiments in Architecture.

OK, that's the genealogy over, although it illustrates that Royle, despite occasional forays, is not content to remain within the 'safe' confines of the sf/fantasy/horror genre. Indeed, apart from the faint smattering of gore accompanying the handful of stories for dark fantasy/horror anthologies from Jones, Brite and Datlow, there is none of the typical sf or fantasy furniture. This even includes the stories for *Interzone*, although one of these, 'The Cast', does turn on Samuel Delany's notion of sf taking a common, almost clichéd expression and reading it

Vicious Circle

Mike Carey • Orbit, 512pp, £7.99 pb

Mike Carey's *Vicious Circle* is that rare and lovely thing, a second book that's even better than the first in the series. Rather than repeating himself or losing any spark of the mad energy that animated his first book, *The Devil You Know*, Carey has produced a stunning sequel that takes his hero – exorcist Felix Castor – on a desperate chase with devilish new complications for his own battered psyche.

Still an atheist, Castor has now been through enough to be deeply dubious about the morals of exorcism, which neatly cuts out most of his own potential income. The case that comes to him, then, seems ideal: he is to rescue a child-ghost, who has been kidnapped by a sociopathic fellow exorcist in order to punish her parents. It's a case that can sit easily with Castor's morals, it seems...but as he follows the twisting pathways of the investigation through exorcists' barges, a



literally. As Bob, an amateur goalkeeper, sheepishly explains after making a near impossible save, "Then I froze." And he has been frozen – suspended in across the goalmouth in mid-air, to the embarrassment and irritation of both teams of players.

But then, Royle takes this initial conceit a stage further, and the tone changes from light-hearted embarrassment to something altogether darker and more vindictive. This sort of sideways shift is apparent in quite a few of the stories in this collection, establishing a mood of psychological stress or alienation that switches, like a carefully sprung trap, into a glimpse of

satanically-possessed London church and a (refreshingly different) secret branch of the worldwide Catholic church, the questions of right and wrong twist around each other in the vicious circle of the title, until Castor is left with an impossible moral dilemma.

The writing itself in *The Devil You Know* was already good enough to make it stand out from the pack in the recent mass of occult mysteries that have been published. Carey's writing is even stronger and more assured in *Vicious Circle*, which takes off from the first page without a single hitch. The magical wonders and horrors multiply in this book, and the plot is far more rich, original and complex than the first in the series. It's fast-paced throughout, and the last hundred pages are nail-bitingly tense, mixing vivid action with truly desperate stakes. Returning characters from the first novel move in disturbing and plausible new directions, and the end of the book, while satisfying in itself, sets up fascinating new possibilities for Castor's future. I can't wait to find out what happens next. **Stephanie Burgis**

the nastier or self destructive aspects of the human psyche: the horrific, though logically followed through consequence of the induced red-green colour blindness in 'Negatives' or the equally Ballardian endings of 'Auteur' and 'Buxton Texas'.

Not all of these work equally well. I couldn't really make head nor tail of the endings of either 'Flying into Naples' or 'The Space-Time Discontinuum', but that may be me being dense. But at his best (as with 'The Churring', 'Skin Deep', 'The Comfort of Stranglers') Royle can induce a mood of horrified fascination, where you almost dread what's coming but can't avoid turning the page. **Stephen Jeffery**

Threshold Shift

Eric Brown • Golden Gryphon, 218pp, \$24.95 hb

Missile Gap

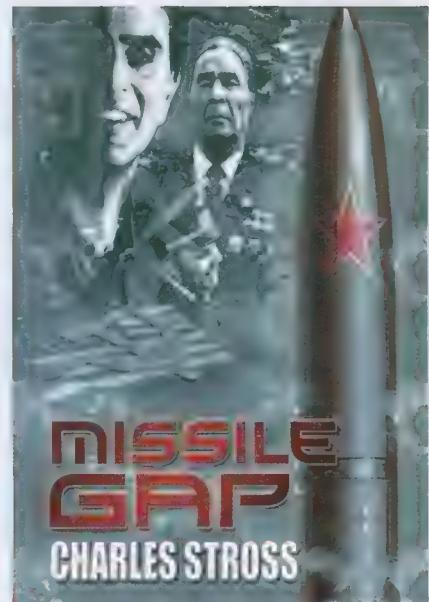
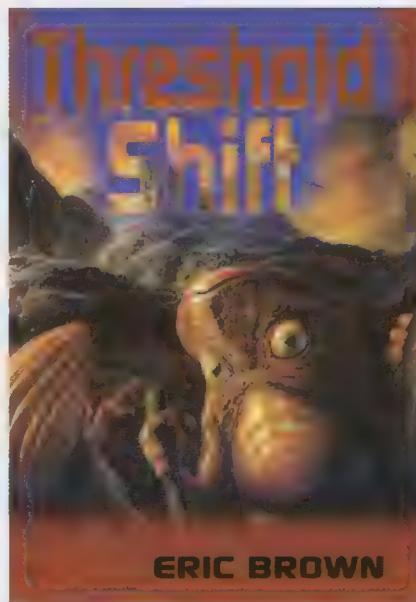
Charles Stross • Subterranean, 99pp, \$35.00 hb

A Soul in a Bottle

Tim Powers • Subterranean, 82pp, \$22.00 hb

When They Came

Don Webb • Temporary Culture, 222pp, \$22.50 hb



Well then, here's a feast upon the desk. Something for everybody's taste in shorts. Here's Eric Brown, doing his altogether level best in *Threshold Shift*, which contains ten stories on the same plane, except for one written with Stephen Baxter, which skedaddles. Here's Charles Stross, having a lot more fun in *Missile Gap*, which is a novella, than he's permitted himself (or been permitted) lately, and not one single note of hector in all the jazz of wonder stuff. Here's Tim Powers, taking just enough time in *A Soul in a Bottle*, which is novelette-length, to damn his protagonist, though not taking up enough of our time to maim him first. And here's Don Webb. *When They Came* contains twenty-three stories, which should not be read together. Some of them are better than the Lovecraft PLC stuff they take off from, which does not necessarily save them for posterity. Several of the others are genuinely brilliant. But most of them are Attempted Rescue stories and, squashed between two covers, seem sameish, a bit anvil chorusy.

One does not want to pull one's punches with Eric Brown, because he is an extremely professional writer who has been very busy at his craft for two decades now, and he should not need any condescension into special pleading. All the same, there is something almost monk-like in the devotions he pays to traditional story forms and outcomes; it is as though one feels the need to guard his cell while he tells the beads of the past. The first story here, 'The Children of Winter' (2001 *Interzone*), is a good example. On what seems to be a planet colonized by humans, three teenagers approach the rite of passage point when they will formally be inducted into adult society through a ceremony which involves their being given first sight of the starship which brought them here. In the meantime, one of them falls in love with Ki, a young woman of

the despised aboriginal native race. At the initiation ceremony, he is told that the aborigines had attacked the original peaceful human landing party. How can this be, muses our protagonist: "I loved Ki, and knew her for a caring, compassionate being." (A plonking of sententiae like this splotches many of the tales in *Threshold Shift*; as though a monk were making pretty damned sure he hadn't lost count of his beads.) In the end, we are not surprised to learn that both humans and aborigines are of the same species; that in fact both lots are natives of the planet, and that it was the tribe who now call themselves "humans" which had in fact attacked a human team centuries earlier, and that the whole culture has shaped itself unanimously around a denial of the massacre by taking on the nature of those they murdered; that the Blues, who Brown

makes sure we understand very early on are technologically advanced, had rescued the humans, who are long-lived and who are still helping them in secret. But all of this implausible contrivance of Denial is unpacked for us in a monotonous infodump at the end of the tale, like the synopsis of some half-forgotten sf masterpiece out of the Golden Age; none of these revelations are acted out on the page. The only lightening of the burden of the past comes in the final lines, when the protagonist – against my expectations certainly – actually escapes with Ki in her steam-wagon, and begins "the long journey north to the polar city of the Blues."

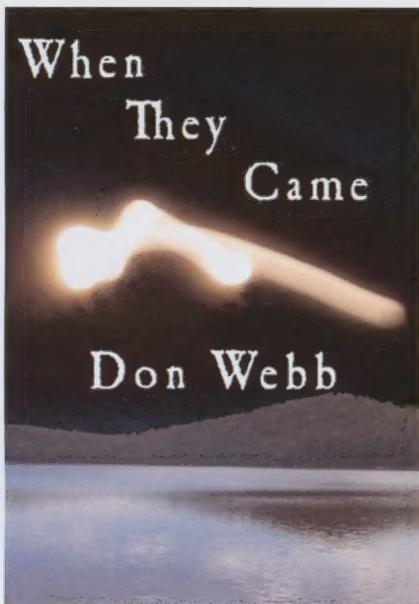
What this tale, and several others in *Threshold Shift*, utterly lack is any sense that they are Twice-Told. But still, something is going on. Brown is a meticulous constructor of the material he chooses; and if there is an innovative element in his work it comes from a modulated reconfiguration of a central life scenario shared by several of his characters: who tend to be men in early middle age from the north-east of England who are deeply uncomfortable with sex and other relationship stuff, and have lonely jobs. What pleases in particular about Brown's handling of this character type is his habit of permitting them to enjoy successful outcomes; the Kethani stories in particular – there are three tales in this volume built around the alien Kethani, and the genuine

SCORES: SHORT BREAD JOHN CLUTE



loving-kindness of their offer of redemptive immortality for free to all human beings – move from a slightly airless gloom in the direction of release, though dogged by sententia en route. It all does take quite a while, though. The only story here that has no time to muse is 'The Spacetime Pit' (1996 *Interzone*), written with Stephen ('Road Runner') Baxter. But we all know all about Baxter...

Charles Stross's nifty **Missile Gap** takes place on a flat Earth which a race of inconceivably advanced aliens, for whom we are as dust that breeds, has created by peeling the surface of our planet like an apple and spreading it out on an extremely vast disk, suddenly, in an instant, just after the 1962 Missile Crisis has ended in tears. There are a lot of echoes here, of course – Hal Duncan's *Vellum* (2006) comes right to mind, and half a dozen novels by Robert Charles Wilson, and Larry Niven, and so on – but Stross has no time to savour his models. Three separate narrative strands, which have no time to meet, unpack the obvious with great speed: the human world has, as it were, been laid out upon a table as part of an experiment whose terms are beyond our grasp, though one good guess is that there are many similar iterations of the human world splayed out upon the disk, whose dimensions are astronomical, and that the general expectation of the aliens is that most if not all of these



iterations of primate culture will self-destruct very quickly. (It is possible that the infusoria under the microscope do the same.) There are also other species on the disk. One decent joke: a non-human spy transformed into human shape goes by the name of Gregor Samsa. What rescues *Missile Gap* from any complacency of despair about the human condition is the inhuman (or transhuman) speed of the whole enterprise. It's the Scherzo of the End of Things: no time left to lose sleep about us.

As soon as we understand that the Chinese Theatre which appears in the first sentence of Tim Powers's **A Soul in a Bottle** is in fact Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Los Angeles where famous 1930s film stars put their fingerprints into wet concrete and became immortal, we know where we are and where we are bound. We are in the country of film, time-machine country, the country of the great counter-factual of our times: which is that the story works. (It is always hard to come to terms with the fact that we framed Roger Rabbit.) A slightly decayed book runner named George Sydney encounters a young woman – Powers makes her sound rather a lot like Katharine Hepburn, but she's not – who doesn't know what Google means, and who attracts all his distracted love. He soon discovers that she is not a time-traveller (which was my first guess, on page one)

but a ghost named Cheyenne. The story unpacks swiftly, cuts to its quick. Cheyenne is a dead poet, killed by her jealous younger sister in the 1960s. She wants to rewrite the world, so that it is her sister who is killed. She needs George's help. But then he meets the surviving sibling, who is still alive, an old woman now, hears her version of what: sees who it is who must die if the intoxicating Cheyenne is to escape limbo. George is not the kind of person likely to do anything decisive. But here he has no choice but to choose. One way or another, he will commit a murder. In the end, he sort of leaves it all in the hands of the gods. But he is damned in any case.

It may be that *A Soul in a Bottle* is best grasped as a vignette embedded in Powers's work as a whole, where Grauman's Chinese Theatre figures more than once, and where damnation potentially attends the kind of action behaviour that protagonists in most genre novels are allowed to undertake for granted. So the power of this novelette comes from its medium. Within that medium, however, it's a killer.

The Attempted Rescues that fill the stories of Don Webb are the fortysomethings that begin so many of them: men whose adult existences have been laid down as structures to keep alive within; men whose adult personalities are spoiled childhoods carried on by other means to no certain end (except the one certain end), whose lives are *bad art*. Bad art does indeed fill **When They Came**: bad god art, bad human art, bad artifacts, bad covens, bad juju. (The title of Robert Aickman's 1966 volume of memoirs is *Attempted Rescue*: I've used the term often to refer to adulthood as we know it: that is, adulthood as a failure to rescue the Golden Age from self-murder: Attempted Rescue is what we do to our own lives with our own hands.) The miracle of *When They Came* is its exuberance, even in those stories so adherent to the implications of the Attempted Rescue that you'd think there were no page available for smiling, like for instance 'The Agony Man' (1995 *Forbidden Acts*), whose protagonist admits, who through inaction has scummed his world over, that he cannot deal with the darkness inside, so he sleeps lots.

In many of the stories assembled here, evil can be seen as a succumbing of the Attempted-Rescue self to a kind of OCD surrender to the mantras of temptation: sexual, mystical, empowering: all lies in the end. The three 'Yellow Flower' stories – 'The Yellow Flower' (new here), 'Pig' (2001 *Horror Garage*) and 'The Fourth Man' (new here) – all circle around the effects of a mysterious (or maybe non-existent) self-help book, whose effect on those who encounter it is precisely obsession: a draining out of the world so that nothing remains but the husk of self-iterations, each repetition of one's self being simpler, more deadly to any Golden Age within.

This does get to be a tad oppressive, of course. And when Webb enters Lovecraft territory, or Clark Ashton Smith country, he tends to snort fustian a little too readily. But there are some stories – like 'The Flower Man' (new here) or 'The Collector' (new here) and 'When They Came' (new here) – which do the reverse of narrowing into one deadly act of the self utterly thinned. 'The Flower Man' carries its female protagonist, a healer with magic powers, is drained by her family and others, until she escapes through extraordinary trials into a triune dance with a male figure who is arousing in every possible sense. In 'The Collector', a failed artist, who teaches women how to do landscapes in semi-rural Texas, falls in love with a woman who turns out to be an utterly horrid monster: except that she is not a monster but an enabler, a collector, an alien from another sphere who "will travel less as time seems to go on, eventually become a statue. I can only tell people what they need to hear. I don't know it otherwise." And she burns "a little hole in his brain." And she tells him enough for him to paint three paintings that would be bought: that would be treasured in the eyes of the world.

And in 'When They Came', a story good enough to justify purchase of the entire book, the world turns into another story of the world. Griffins haunt the skies, the woman the protagonist loves and has hunted obsessively is found fucking a griffin until her cunt steams. Afterwards, the man and the woman discover that it may be possible for her to share her Golden Age with him. Tentatively, they see one another: darkly, but light begins to shine, griffins scream, the world is different. As the story ends they begin to attempt their rescue. **John Clute**

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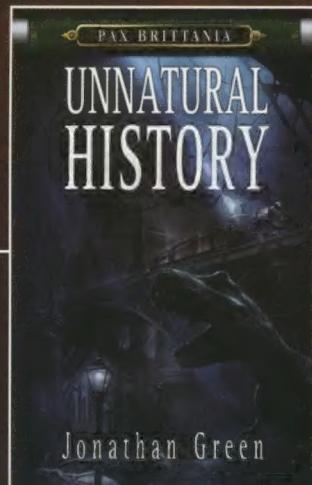
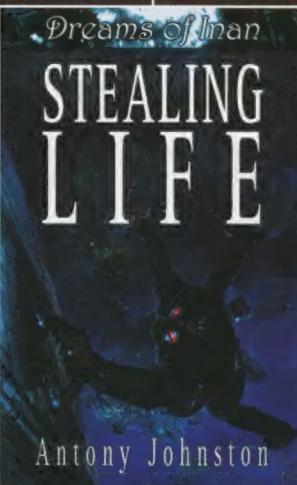
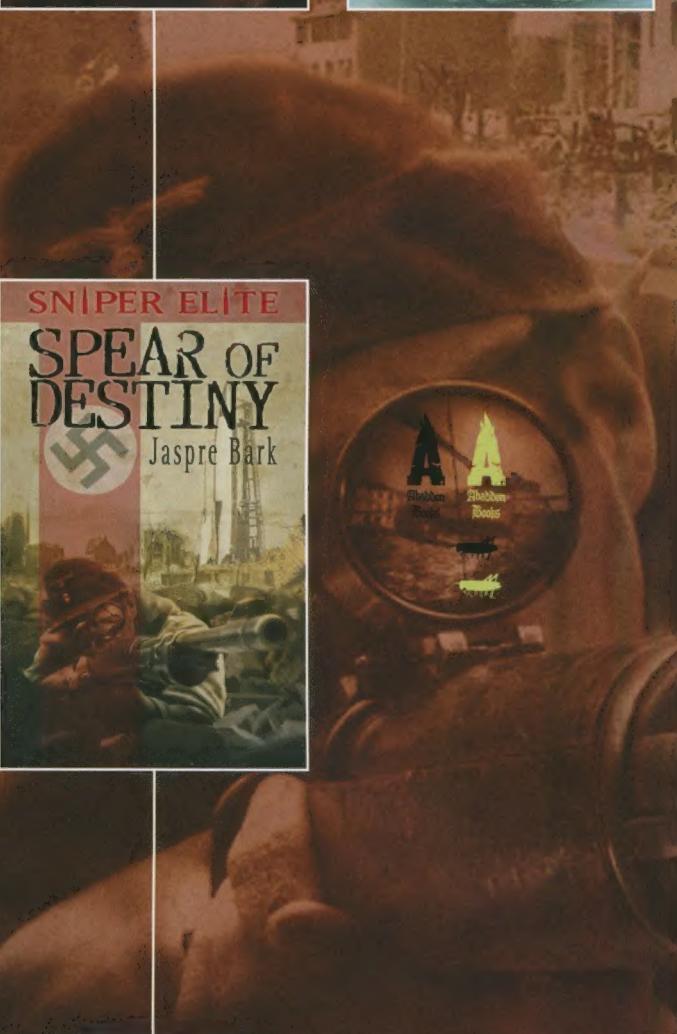
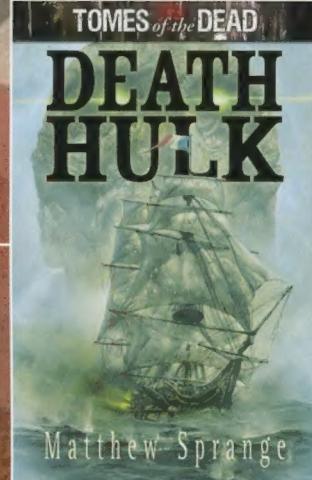
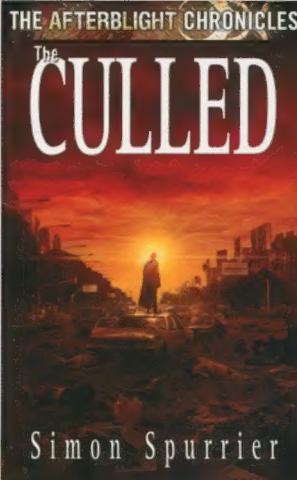
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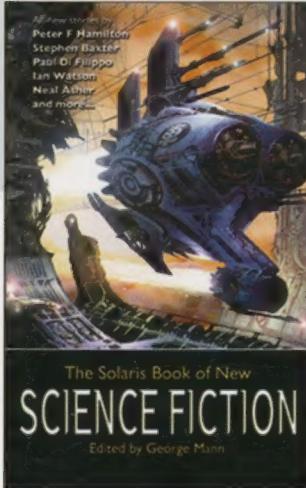
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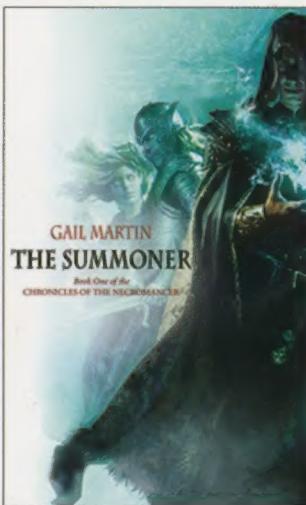


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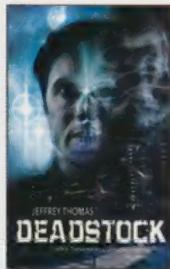
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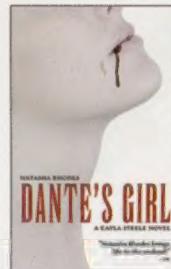
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